

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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FEBRUARY



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!
FEATURE NOVEL

● **PILGRIM OF THE GUN STORM**

by **WILLIAM R. COX**

TWO NOVELETTES

● **"TO HELL WITH BARBWIRE!"**

by **MORGAN LEWIS**

● **GHOST HERD**

ON THE JAWBONE

by **HOWARD BLOOMFIELD**

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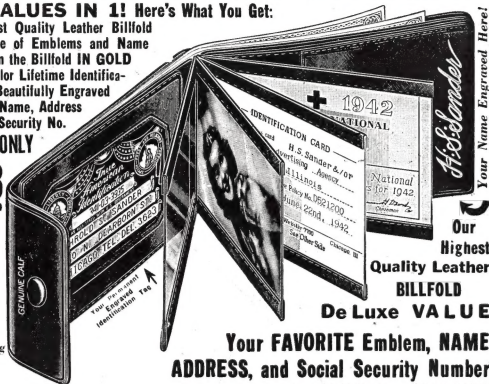
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**TOM SAID
"NO"
HE'S STILL
WAITING
FOR "LUCK"**



BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE
HIS TIME STUDYING
RADIO AT HOME



SAME OLD GRIND--
SAME SKINNY PAY
ENVELOPE-- I'M
JUST WHERE I
WAS FIVE YEARS
AGO

GUESS I'M A
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GET ANYWHERE

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PUBLISHED
FEBRUARY 11TH

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FEBRUARY, 1944

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Maybe you've seen it in the eyes of some friend. . .

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THAT RECKLESS SPIRIT

A RECKLESS, wild spirit shines from the faces of some men. It is a look of far places and violent deeds. That look marks a man and sets him apart from all others. Maybe you've seen it in the eyes of some friend, some stranger—maybe it shines from your own eyes.

In the eyes of some of the lads returning from overseas, you'll see that look—that indomitable force spurring them to make things right in a world turned upside down.

That same force spurred men in other bloody times . . . in the winning of the hell-roaring West. Pioneer women knew that look and sometimes feared it. Fear was in the heart of Nancy Lou Holt when she found that recklessness in the eyes of Mace Willard, the saddle-bum from Nowhere. . . .

Nancy Lou thought of Mace Willard long after he had left the little cowtown bank. She tried to put him from her mind but could not. What had she read in the face of the lean man from Nowhere? It was something exciting. It was something different from what she was accustomed to from the many swains of the countryside. It was—more like the thing she saw in Sandy Drover!

It was, she thought determinedly, the very thing which had kept her from marrying Drover before now. It was a recklessness, a wild spirit which shone from the faces of certain men. When she had been very young and her father had first returned from California, Leb Holt had that look in his eyes. After he had made his modest strike and bought the S-Bar it had disappeared—to return in the last days before he was murdered.

Sandy Drover had that look, too. But Sandy lived on violence, and knew all the sly tricks of making it work out to his best advantage. There was the time Sandy was hanging around town for his elusive foreman, Jaybird. . . .

In a small Mexican bistro on a side alley he found Jaybird.

Jaybird said foolishly, "Hullo, Boss."

"Are you drunk?" asked Sandy.

"Uh-uh, Boss," Jaybird shook his head.

"Just thinkin'."

"About what?" asked Sandy.

"About us," whispered Jaybird. He had a droop to his left eyelid and his lips curled in an eternal, meaningless grin. "We're smarter'n hell, ain't we?"

Sandy said, "We sure are. Now take one more drink and you and me are going back to S-Bar—and make a nice clean-up. We got *another* new owner—name of Eldridge."

Jaybird blinked his left eye rapidly. He said, "Ain't we the ones! Ahaw! Ahaw! How much money I got now, Boss?"

"Two thousand dollars."

"And I kin go to N'Yawk?" laughed Jaybird. An' ride in a hansom cab?"

"You can buy a handsome cab, if you want," Sandy chuckled. "Come on, now. I don't want you drunk when you meet this brand-new owner of the good ole S-Bar. New owners on the S-Bar keep us living in right handsome style."

He got Jaybird out of the bistro and up on his horse and rode with him toward the S-Bar. Jaybird had to be handled right, and Sandy was always meticulous of the least detail in taking care of Jaybird.

That was why Sandy did not notice the two riders who pulled off the road in the dark to let him go by.

Jaybird said:

"Eldridge is the new owner, huh? Never knew a man named Eldridge. You reckon he'll like ownin' the S-Bar?"

The two men in the bushes did not move until the sound of Sandy's horses died away. Then the Kansas Kid said, "Drover sold the S-Bar again!"

"Eldridge?" Repeated Mace Willard softly. There was a growing excitement in him. . . . He had known a gent called Eldridge. And Mace knew a score of men who had things to tell about Eldridge. But those men couldn't talk. They were dead! . . .

The full, complete, exciting story of this phantom-like S-Bar ranch will be told in the next issue by William R. Cox. And there will be hand-picked novelettes and short stories by Small, Blackburn, Colter, Steele, Sterrett, Lawson and others. March issue—published Feb. 11th!

The Editor.



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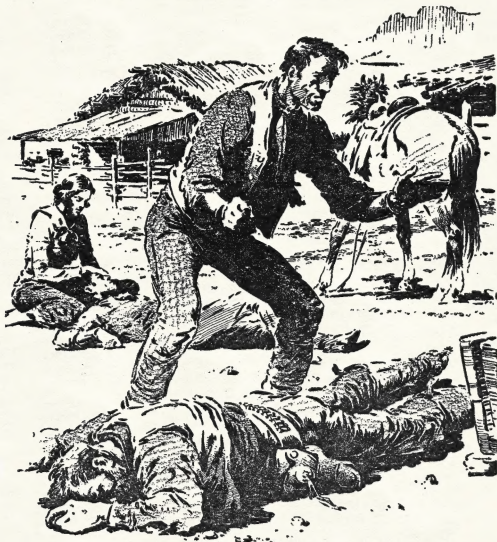
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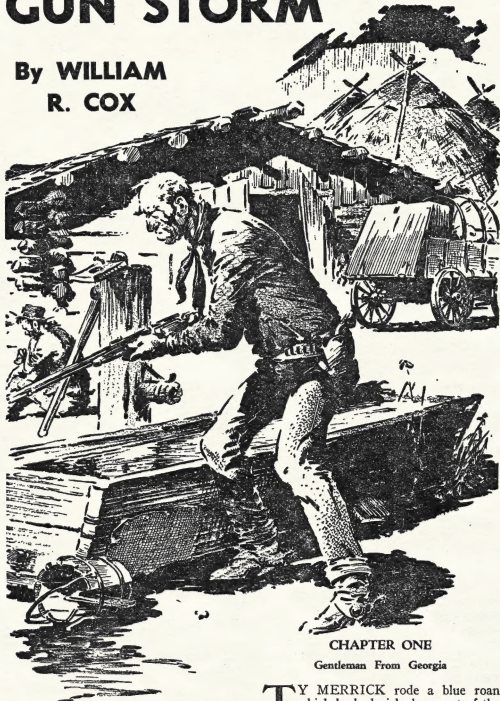
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GUN STORM

By WILLIAM
R. COX



CHAPTER ONE

Gentleman From Georgia

"Don't!" said Ty. "A bullet's too good. . . . We'll hang him!"

TY MERRICK rode a blue roan which he had picked up east of the Brazos and the working saddle felt good beneath him. The Texas sun beat down, but his wide hat shaded the hawk

nose which all the Merricks wore on their lean faces. He shifted the gun which already felt comfortable at his hip and the grim lines deepened about his wide, flat mouth.

It was a long way back to Georgia. . . .

He passed a side road, noting the scrawled sign, *Tarantula Ranch—7 mi.* He'd gotten used to the size of the Texas estates in the months he had wandered over the vast acres of the Lone Star State and a seven-mile front walk no longer amazed him. But he looked with considerable interest at the two figures who were parting at the ranch entrance.

The man on the black stallion was tall and wide. He wore a gaily colored shirt and a red handkerchief around his neck. His ruddy face was wreathed in a fond smile as he held the hand of the woman upon the small, spirited bronch.

The woman wore a flat hat, skewered with a long pin through golden hair, made more secure by a rakish strap beneath her small determined chin. She had a tipped nose and her mouth was red-lipped and full. She glanced idly at Ty Merrick, saying off-handedly:

"Howdy, stranger?"

Ty's hat was in his hand immediately. The roan danced to a pause. "Howdy, Ma'am—and, sir. Could you inform me if Moseby is close ahead?"

The big man squinted his eyes. "You're from the south, I take it. Allus love to hear the old talk. My folks was from Augusta."

Ty beamed despite himself. "Ty Merrick's the name. From Savannah way."

The big man said, "I'm Tom Roche and this here is Miss Kitty Poley. If you're lookin' for a job, Merrick. . . ."

The woman said banteringly, "I need him worse than you, Tom. He looks right handy. Would you work for me, Merrick?" She had a crisp way of speaking and a disconcertingly direct manner.

Ty said gravely, "Ma'am, I admire women tremendously. But I'm afraid, beggin' your pahdon, that I couldn't work good for one."

Tom Roche threw back his head and roared with laughter. "There you go, Kitty! Merrick—you're for me! I'll pay you top wages, sight unseen."

Ty smiled gently. "Thank you, sir. But

right now I'm lookin' for a man. Name of Jack Felsch, supposed to be livin' in Moseby."

Tom Roche's laughter died. The girl's eyes narrowed to pinpoints. Roche said soberly, "You'll find him, Merrick. He runs the Jack O' Diamonds. You can't miss him—in Moseby."

"That's right," said the girl scornfully. "You can't help smelling him as you enter town."

Their instant hostility chilled Ty. He said with a low bow, "Thank you. I'm proud to have met you-all."

He rode away, aware of their keen eyes upon his back. He would liked to have stayed and talked to these pleasant people. He almost had done so—until he had remembered that he had no place among such as Tom Roche and Kitty Poley.

Back in the penitentiary they had taught him that. The leg irons, the brutality of the guards, the ever-present humiliation had etched those deep lines about his thin lips. He was twenty-four—and he looked thirty.

Well, he had learned some things in jail. He had mastered the way of fifty-two pasteboards; he had been told the names of men who would help him to get money. He had to have money—he knew now what it meant. His own had gone in his defense, to pay the great lawyer, Wyatt Tilfair. Perhaps it had been worth it—the charge was murder and he had never been hung by the neck until he was dead.

He had killed George Hayworth in a fair fight, spent his time in prison—and now Texas would allow him to begin anew.

The roan horse lengthened his stride, scenting fodder and surcease from travel. Presently Ty saw the town of Moseby. It was a one-street town, with the usual by-ways where towns-people dwelt, and there were several saloons.



HE RODE in, and was amazed at the number of people on Aguila Street. Then he remembered it was Saturday and that the punchers would be in from all about. But still there seemed a plenty of citizens, going back and forth,

in and out of many places—but mostly in and out of a large and ornate building which bore the sign, "Jack O' Diamonds." Roche and Kitty Poley had been quite right—a man couldn't miss the establishment of Happy Jack Felsch.

The blue roan went gratefully into the coolness of the stable behind the Ace Hotel. Ty walked the streets, eager for company, anxious to begin making his stake. He was not a strong, silent man—but a merry, smiling fellow.

At the door of the Jack O' Diamonds stood two worthies who were dour of mien, each armed with revolvers slung low, drinking whiskey from tumblers as they scrutinized the crowd who gambled and wasailed. Of the nearest, a big, gorilla-like man, Ty inquired:

"Where could I find Jack Felsch, gents?"

The big man said, "Get outa my way."

His little companion had quick, nervous hands. Ty had seen such needle-thin, blade-nosed men before, in the solitary dungeons. Ty said sharply:

"I asked a civil question. I'll take an answer!"

The big one thrust his arm at Ty, still eyeing the crowd as though he expected trouble. "G'wan. Don't bother us!"

Ty's nimble feet carried him out of reach. From his boot, in one swooping motion, came the knife named after a remote ancestor, a Mr. James Bowie. Its blade slashed at the outstretched arm. The big man leaped away, unscathed, his eyes bulging at the swiftness of attack.

The little man unholstered his gun as though it were greased. "Stand back, stranger!"

A voice boomed, "Downer! Kaley! That's enough!"

Ty turned, confused, not believing his ears. Why, that voice— He rubbed a hand across his eyes, staring. The ample waistcoat, flowered, stained; the sideburns sweeping the collar; the protuberant eyes and full jowls of the stout man were burned on his memory. He exclaimed, "Judge Tilfair! You heah?"

The big man, called Downer, relaxed and went phlegmatically back to watching the people who came and went.

The little one growled, "Yore friend's too handy with the sticker, Judge. Take

him away. You know we got trouble."

Ty found his arm caressed by the fat palms of the Judge he had last seen in Georgia. He was led through the crowded saloon. They were almost at the rear of the noisy establishment when he heard Downer roar:

"There they are!"

Ty wheeled, breaking away from the Judge. Two figures with drawn long-barrelled guns had slid into the saloon. To a man, every customer hit the floor in sliding haste.

Downer's gun was in his hand, Kaley was already shooting.

The Judge had disappeared. Ty stood, undecided, watching with hard eyes. Downer and Kaley had separated, the men were between two fires. They were hard-faced, rough-dressed, neither miners nor cattlemen, Ty thought. They were firing their guns, but big Downer and little Kaley were quicker.

The two men fell, scarcely over the threshold. The echo of guns stopped, eddies of black smoke sailed through the batting doors. Men crawled from hastily-sought shelter and went forward, forming a circle about the two prone figures.

The Judge reappeared, as though by magic. He said pleasantly, "It's good to see you, Tyrus. Come in and meet my friend, Jack Felsch."

Ty went through the door and it closed behind him. He went thoughtfully, his mind working over what he had seen and not understood. He had come to a strange community in a new, raw land.

CHAPTER TWO

Sixgun Setup

THE man behind the large, battered desk had the lean ascetic features of a fanatic. He was dressed in black from the stock about his sinewy neck to the polished, stitched boots. He had black eyes and his mustache was jet. His hair was parted directly in the center and plastered to his long, narrow skull. He was as handsome as a king snake.

Wyatt Tilfair, ex-Georgia lawyer and political power, was still talking. "There is opportunity here, Tyrus. You saw Hideout Kaley and Big Downer handle a

delicate situation. Marshal Wyckoff will not interfere so long as the other parties draw first."

Ty said, "Wait. As I understand it, gentlemen, you control the town and you aim to control the county. The Judge wants to be governor. Mr. Felsch wants to sit behind the throne."

They gave assent, watching him.

Then for two hours Ty listened while Wyatt Tilfair frankly confessed that back in Georgia he had been investigated by the Bar Association and found wanting. Ty learned that his own case had not been lily white—that a juror had been bribed to hold out against the charge of murder. Ty knew now that Jack Felsch's name had been given to him in jail at Tilfair's instigation.

Tilfair said, "We are offering you a job—dealing in the gambling room, at first. Dealing faro is a respected and square profession—or will be in your case. We can afford to play fair at one table. And when you have made friends, ingratiated yourself—we have a good job for you. As we grow, you will advance. We are offering you respectability, position—power."

Ty was acutely aware of the scrutiny of Jack Felsch's snake eyes. He met the black man's gaze and asked, "But why do you need me?"

Felsch said coldly, "Maybe we don't."

"Ah, but we do!" exclaimed the Judge. "You are not too well liked, Jack. We need a good-looking young man, an honest, straight-forward character. He must have brains. We need him for front man."

Felsch lifted his shoulders, dropped them. His voice was flat. "It's your idea, Judge. He can take it or leave it."

Tilfair leaned forward. "Tyrus, make friends—that's your job. Jack will tone down his place. The election is in two months."

There was much more. Tom Roche's name was mentioned, and Jack Felsch's face grew narrow and suffused with blood. Roche was the leader of the opposition, it seemed. Ty listened to it all and grew weary. He said at last: "I'll let you know tomorrow." He shifted his attention fully upon Jack Felsch. "Tell your bodyguards not to bother me or I'll have to kill them as they did the two today who were slow

and clumsy. In the morning I will give you my decision."

"You're pretty cocky," said Felsch without choler. "Maybe that's good. Maybe it's bad. Nobody will bother you—until tomorrow."

Ty nodded to the Judge and abruptly went out. He wanted to think. He walked through the bar and onto the street. He had hoped to leave his past in the penitentiary back home. But now that he knew that Tilfair, of that ancient Georgia family, was a crook, and that his own case had been partially fixed he was nauseated.

He would, of course, move on. Texas was as big as the world—there was always another town in Texas, remote from the previous one.

Ty turned into a place which advertised, *Eggs—and Ham*. Only two customers were present. Ty sat at a table near the door, sunk in his own thoughts. A heavy voice from across the room said: "Hicks and Wolf were cheated in the Jack O' Diamonds. When they came heeled they were cut down in cold blood. And you turn Downer and Kaley loose! It ain't right, Frank!"

A small, wispy man with a silver star upon his neat, dark shirt, said quietly, "Hicks and Wolf went in with drawn hoglegs, and they got it. I cain't do nothin', Tom."

"Tilfair is sendin' for broken-down gents from Georgia to play his game!" said Tom Roche hotly. "Met one today as he rode in. We're headin' for big trouble, come elections."

The marshal said in his colorless, dry voice, "You want to start a war, Tom?"

"Dammit, I will if I have to!" exploded Roche. "Killers like Downer and Kaley got to be run out of the county!"

The waitress, a plain woman of forty-odd, blocked Ty's view of the two men across the room. He said absently, "Ham and eggs and coffee," and his thoughts went turbulently around. He felt no insult at Roche's words, knowing now that they were true. He moved in his chair and then was aware of the impending tragedy.

Felsch had entered silently by the front door. He wore a gun under his black coat, the butt protruding. Tilfair blocked the door so that no one could follow.

IN THE rear stood Big Downer and Hideout Kaley, backs against the wall, faces intent. It was all planned, of course. Felsch's voice was smooth as silk, but the triumph beneath was plain to be heard. "You're passin' out insults behind a man's back, Tom. That ain't right."

Chairs scraped and Tom Roche's eyes slanted back and fro, discerning his entrapment. The marshal sat quiet, hands below the table. Tom's gaze came to Ty, lingered, then he shrugged and leaned back in his chair. He said, "Howdy, murderers!"

The woman stood transfixed in the door to the kitchen, fright written upon her. Ty wished she would go away.

Felsch said, "You can't call names like that, Tom. You should know that. This is Texas."

"This was Texas," corrected Roche. "It's got to be a damn refuge for crooks nowadays!"

Marshal Wyckoff said, "Don't Tom. Keep quiet!" He said to Felsch, "This won't do. You can't get away with it."

Felsch shook his head in mock sorrow. "Tom's asking for it. In a minute I'm goin' to ask him to fill his hand. He can do it or not—but he can't insult me!"

Tom Roche, Ty saw, was not afraid. He tilted his chair even farther back. He said comfortably, "I won't draw, you can tie to that. If you murder me, the town won't stand for it. You can fire when ready, Murderers!"

It was a cool master stroke. Ty's admiration for the cattleman mounted at his courage. He saw Felsch bite his lip, saw the two killers at the back of the room wrinkle their brows. There were cottonwood trees on the outskirts of town, with long limbs from which men could be strung up by the neck—for murder.

The Judge stepped forward, whispered in Felsch's ear, his pendulous jowls shaking with eagerness. Ty wondered dully how he could ever have hired this fat, evil man to defend him in court. Tilfair had brains, that was it. More brains than Felsch—than Roche, probably. Felsch licked his lips and strode a step forward, lowering his voice so that only those closest could hear him. He almost whispered, "I'll kill you, all right, Tom. Then I'm

taking over the Tarantula ranch—and its charming owner."

Out of the whirl of instant action, Ty heard Tilfair cry, "Tyrus! No!"

But Ty was in motion even before Tom Roche. His table went kiting across the aisle which bisected the center of the restaurant. It struck Felsch, threw him off balance. Marshal Wyckoff, coming erect, held a steady, large gun in his right hand.

Ty's Colt spoke once, twice. At the far end of the room Downer and Kaley staggered apart, Kaley holding his wrist, Downer unscathed, but raising his hands at the threat of a third shot from Ty's gun. Felsch, pinned by the table, never got his weapon out.

Tom Roche was on his feet, spraddled, aiming a weapon at Tilfair. He said, "I wouldn't use that sleeve derringer, Jedge. Looks like your Georgia boy ain't havin' any of your little games."

Ty backed so that he could survey them all. He said in his gentle southern voice, "I was thinkin' of leavin' these here parts. But I reckon now I got to stay."

"You'll stay, all right," said Felsch sharply. There was a vein beating at his temple and he was blacker than ever in every aspect. "You'll stay—forever."

Ty said courteously, "I'd admire to meet you, Felsch. Name your weapons and your time."

Judge Tilfair found his voice. He bellowed, "You jailbird, you dare to challenge a gentleman!"

Ty widened his mouth into a grin. "I've been in jail, right enough. But where is your gentleman? Not this crook! I'm servin' notice now, Felsch. Any time you even speak to me again, I'll cut you down. And that goes for your two killers back yonder. . . . Mr. Roche, shall we leave these—people?"

Tom Roche walked slowly forward. He said, "I reckon Frank can handle 'em. If he wants to." He cast a dubious look at the small, statue-still marshal. Wyckoff's face was flinty hard, watchful. Roche said, "He can at least hold 'em on a peace charge for the night. Let's go, Merrick."

They went out. Night had fallen. Roche untied his stallion and led him down the middle of Aguila Street, as calm as though on parade. They walked to the hotel and, without further ado, Ty caught

up the roan and saddled. They rode east from town and took a turning five miles short of the place Ty had first encountered the cattleman.

Roche said succinctly, "My place is the Bar J. You want to stick this thing out, I take it."

Ty reined close to the black horse and held out his hand. It was enfolded in an iron grip and not then nor ever did Tom Roche thank him in any other way for his part in the affair of the restaurant. They rode on.

CHAPTER THREE

Felsch Makes His Play

THE stockade was of cottonwood poles, ten feet high. The Bar J riders, Tenstrike, Eightball and a couple of other lanky fellows, had hazed a dozen head of wild ones inside. Tom Roche said, "You'd better stay out until you get onto things better."

Kitty Poley smiled at Ty. He looked longing at Tenstrike's rope, the easy way the straw boss handled the loop as he went within the gate. Kitty said, "You've never ridden a wild one, Ty. They're man-eaters, some of them."

Ty said, "I'm goin' to try, one time."

The weeks had sped by swiftly. The Bar J had supplied all there was of life for Ty Merrick. He had not even gone to town, almost forgotten the turmoil of Moseby. Ranch life suited him. Something in his planter blood responded to the cattle country so that he was happy and content even riding the range alone, looking for strays. He drew no wages, had received no promises. And for the time, that was enough.

He saw much of Kitty Poley. The Tarantula and the Bar J were side by side and Tom's men and Kitty's worked together in harmony, so that to all intents and purposes the two ranches comprised one large spread.

He had not been long at the ranch before Ty became aware that it would not be long before the two outfits would indeed merge—through marriage. Ty was conscious of a sharp pain somewhere within him, but he accepted the situation—and plunged into ranch life.

He said now, "Just once—if it kills me!"

Tenstrike, a tough, laughing wrangler, said, "I'll ketch one fer you, Ty."

It was not easy to rope them, even in the stockade. Tenstrike finally got his small loop afool the forefoot of a snorting dun with the black streak of the mustang strain down his back and Ty watched eagerly as Eightball and Tony helped blindfold and tie the horse while Tenstrike managed the saddle cinches. Then all waited, watching closely with grinning faces.

Ty went through. He walked close, placed a hand upon the swelling nostrils of the dun. He said, "Slow down there, old Muddy."

With the aid of a ladder, Tom and Kitty had mounted to a platform of boards to view the fun. Tenstrike said, "Yawl git and I'll turn him a-loose." The other cowboys went out of the gate.

Ty said, "Here goes nothin'!"

He put a foot in the stirrup and swung himself up, graceful and lean and ready for the hell to come. He had watched Tenstrike on this very dun—Tenstrike hadn't ridden it out that time. The straw-boss grinned and twitched the blindfold, running for the fence, whooping in anticipation of the fun.

For a moment Muddy did not move, tensing himself, weighing the man in the saddle who galled him. Then he shot forward, stopped stiff-legged. Ty almost swallowed his tongue, but his hard-riding ancestors had bequeathed him a sense of balance and knowledge of horse flesh. He deliberately plied his spurs, and from his lips came the high weird yell of the Rebel Army.

Muddy reacted promptly. There was dust and there was greased lightning and there was four feet of Texas ozone between the four feet of Muddy and the ground. It seemed that Muddy's head would hit the dirt first as he came down. Then he was weaving and kicking and striking out in all directions and the end of Ty's spine was subjected to a series of shocks stern enough to totally disrupt the backbone of a lesser man.

It became torture almost unbearable as it went on. Muddy was canny, a brainy animal. He tried scraping the wall, he

tried sunfishing. Then he tried a sudden roll in the dirt.

Ty had expected that. He was out of the stirrups and following the squirming animal, shouting his war cry. Muddy's ears twitched, he came stomping to his feet. Ty was in the saddle and Eightball was opening the gate.

They shot out, horse and rider, as if from a gun. The prairie stretched ahead and Muddy ran sweeter than any horse Ty had ever bestrode in one last effort to get clean away from this two-legged maniac who screamed in his sensitive ears.

Ty could hear Tom's cheers, the treble yell of Kitty, happy for his triumph over the wild animal, and then he was out of range of their voices and the breeze was in his face and he was riding sweet and pretty, straight as a string for the distant foothills.

It was a great moment. He bent low, talking to Muddy, urging the beast on. After the run the animal would calm down, and then Ty would have a real work horse. The blue roan was not a range mount—this was what he needed. He was happier

than he ever remembered, riding Muddy over the flats.

He heard the gunfire as in a dream. He was a mile away when it started. He had to use all the remaining strength in his arms to get Muddy headed around. He cried, "Come on, horse! Pick up those feet!" He yelled again in that shrill defiant southern manner and Muddy miraculously was obedient, reversing himself.

They were heading back. Ty could see Tenstrike, coming from the bunkhouse, a Winchester in his hands. Eightball was already firing his six-shooter at something in front of the house. There was no sign of Kitty—nor Tom.



TY SPURRED the horse, bending low. It all came back to him now, the elections, the fact that Tom was being run for sheriff by his cattlemen friends, although he had never yet made a speech nor asked for a vote. The ranchers had worked quietly and in unison, leaving the town to make its own decision,

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counting upon the evil works of the Jack O' Diamonds crowd to gain votes when they were needed. There had been many meetings which Ty had attended, and success had been around the corner, all had thought.

Success, he thought now, had been too assured. Felsch and the Judge had acknowledged it. Assassination was the next step—but no one had thought they dared go that far. Ty gritted his teeth, riding in. He had no gun upon him, nothing with which to fight.

He rounded the end of the stockade and ran by the corral. He caught a glimpse of Tom on the ground, his head in Kitty's lap, and his heart turned over. The dun horse cleared a hedge along the side of Toms ranch-house and was in the road.

He saw Downer raising the gun, but he never faltered. Kaley was upon a fleet gray and there were three other men, all masked, as were Felsch's two killers. He came straight for them, and the flash of Downer's revolver was in his face as he left the saddle. He felt the searing pain down the muscles of his back, then his arms closed upon the giant.

They hit the dirt with a terrible thud. Tenstrike and Eightball were both pumping lead and Kaley gave a command. The others rode away, shooting at the defenders, but afraid to fire upon the two who writhed on the ground. In a moment they were gone wordlessly from sight.

Ty shifted his elbow. Downer was stronger than he, but Downer had never fought in a filthy jail yard to keep a precious sack of tobacco from a crowd of criminals who used tricks as old as Cain, and twice as murderous.

The elbow poked into Downer's windpipe. The mask had fallen away and the big man's bear arms were squeezing Ty close. In a trice it became apparent that the closer they squeezed, the more of Downer's wind was cut off.

Ty felt the man heave. He let himself go limp, not forgetting to jab once more with the elbow. Then Downer was rolling over, trying for a new grip.

Ty leaped to his feet. His left boot shot out with no mercy, remembering Tom upon the ground. It caught Downer on the chin, checked him. Ty leaped in, was clouted with a blow which stretched him.

He had underestimated the great strength of his adversary.

He lay there, watching Downer come for him. Then he wheeled up both boots and kicked. Downer ducked, but Ty was not kicking at a mark. He was flipping himself in a gymnastic trick to regain his footing. He was erect and his left hand went out. He swiveled his hip, grasped Downer's wrist, threw the big man in an arc which flattened him on his back in the dust of the road.

He swung then, bending low, using the edge of his taut palms. He cut behind Downer's ears with stunning force. Downer shivered once, then lay still.

Tenstrike had the rifle steadied.

Ty said, "Don't kill him now!"

The good-natured strawboss was white and altered so that Ty scarcely recognized him. "He got Tom!"

"Wait!" said Ty. "I'll hang him myself—later."

Tenstrike lowered the gun. He said, "Hangin's too good. But a clean bullet would be better. I'll hogtie him."

Ty limped away, mopping his cuts. He entered the cool adobe ranch-house. Eightball, his round face tragic, was bringing a basin and towels. Tom was on a narrow bed, pale and still. Kitty was plugging a hole in his chest. It was on the right side, Ty saw, but a rifle bullet through the lung was almost as bad as through the heart.

Kitty said stonily, "Doctor Morgan." "Get Morgan. Quick, Ty!"

Ty stumbled out. Tenstrike had the roan waiting, and his own pony. They mounted without words and the surprised horses leaped under the spurs and in a moment they were a cloud of dust riding for Moseby. Tenstrike had brought Ty's six-gun and a carbine and the Bowie was again slanted along the sheath in his boot. Tenstrike wore two Colts and a sawed-off shotgun rode in his scabbard.

CHAPTER FOUR

Failure as a Gunman

TY said, "We don't want trouble right now. We'll ride around." Tenstrike growled, "If trouble comes, I'm a-waitin'." But he followed

Ty along the edge of Moseby. Over the town lay a silence more ominous than sound. It hung like a pall and enveloped the quiet side street up which the two men rode warily. They found gaunt, aging Doctor Morgan in his barn, oiling an old Sharps buffalo gun.

Ty said, "Tom's hurt bad." He caught up a bridle and led a lean-legged swift mare from her stall. Tenstrike came with the saddle and the doctor put the gun aside, reaching for his saddle bags and their precious contents.

Even as he moved, the doctor said, "There's hell to pay. Thirty or forty toughs have ridden into town in the past three days. I've been insulted three times in twenty-four hours—as have others who were working for Tom and against Felsch and Tilfair. We were winning, by Gad! People were waking up."

Ty said, "That's what made them move against Tom. We got Downer."

"Dead?" asked Morgan hopefully, mounting the mare.

"Trussed up," said Ty grimly. "I'm bringin' him in to Wyckoff tomorrow—or sooner."

Doctor Morgan said worriedly, "Frank's been awful quiet. I know he hasn't sold out his star to Felsch. But he's always been slow to act. He's getting old—like me!" He heeled the mare and she strode out in space-eating strides on the road to the Bar J.

Tenstrike said, "We got to look around, ain't we?" His hands were nervous on his weapons. In his usually smiling eyes was a deep, glowing light which made Ty shiver.

Ty said gently, "Not you. Go home and watch over Tom and Miss Poley."

Tenstrike said, "Tom was more than a boss to me."

"Tom's still alive," said Ty sharply. "Please go home, Tenstrike!"

It was the "please" which did it. Tenstrike recognized Ty's plea as just and he left, his chin resting on his shoulder, unhappy.

Ty rode the blue roan to Aguila Street. He drew in, sheltered by the portico which stretched across the walk before the general store, its columns concealing his identity for the time being. From under his hat brim he watched narrowly, count-

ing the hosts of gunmen opposed to him.

They traveled in threes and fours, as though patrolling the town. They wore beards, most of them, and their eyes were narrow-set and unblinking. Ty had seen that stripe of man in the penitentiary. Three of them walked past Frank Wyckoff without givink an inch of the walk.

Wyckoff trudged past the store. Ty said in a low voice, "Marshal!"

The little man looked up. "What happened?"

"They bushwhacked Tom."

Wyckoff looked down at the dirt. "You better light a shuck. The Judge allows you're wanted in Georgia."

"It's a lie," said Ty. "I served my time."

"He claims they found a flaw. A bribed juror. Someone wrote and tipped them off."

Ty paled. "He wrote them himself! He's the one who did it. I was in jail, how could I bribe anyone?"

The marshal said, "Your lawyer's the same as you, in the law. Judge is about to get you extrydited, he says. Don't know if he can. You better lay low."

"I'll lay one on him!" said Ty. He stopped, considering. "I've got Downer. Will you see he gets his, if we bring him in?"

The marshal said, "Downer? Yeah." He nodded firmly. "I'll see he hangs. If Tom dies—"

"Tom' not going to die!" said Ty harshly. "You've got to see it's done orderly, by law. Take him to the county seat and have him tried."

The three bearded men appeared abruptly. They had walked around silently and come from the other end of the portico. They were behind the marshal and seemed little interested in Ty. One said, "You damned little squirt. I knew you in Dodge and you were yella then!"

It was a predetermined shoot-out, Ty knew at once. He lifted his sixgun in one motion, clucking gently to the roan. The horse stepped clear, but not ungently, so that Ty was firm-seated, ready.

The three were drawing. It meant anarchy, the marshal killed by strange men who would ride out and go free, so that Tilfair and Felsch could take over. It was another bold, dramatic stroke. The

little marshal spun and fired in the same breathless instant, like a small poisonous spider. He might, as Doctor Morgan said, be slow getting into action. But he was hell on wheels when he started, Ty thought, throwing down his heavy Colt.

The first man, thumbing his trigger, went down as Wyckoff shot him through the chest. The second was fanning his weapon and Ty winced as the bullets thumped. The third threw a shot at Ty, but already the six-shooter had spoken from the back of the steady roan. Ty knew his shot was good before the man fell, amazed at the sudden interruption of their murder.

Wyckoff's gun was down, dragging. It was the second man who had got him, Ty thought. But Ty's second bullet was ranging downward, smack into the beard of the assassin. Just that quick it was over, and Ty drew a sobbing breath, remembering that other dead man in the Georgia morning's dim light. This was the second time he had drawn—and now there were three corpses to his credit . . . things seemed to come in two and threes.

He dismounted, his heart thumping, to pick up the little marshal in his arms. Wyckoff opened his eyes and said distinctly and rapidly, "Get goin', Merrick. There's sixty of 'em in town, countin' Felsch's gang at the Jack. Get the cattle-men. . . . I'm through and I'm not sorry. . . ."

There was a rattle in his throat. Shouts came from up Aguila Street and footsteps sounded on the boards. Ty wheeled and leaped for the saddle as the first shot echoed. The storekeeper took one frantic look and slammed up his shutters. Then Ty was riding for the ranch and lead was spattering the dirt under his horse's feet.

He was sick, thinking of four dead men about the porch of the general store. No wonder the owner was frightened. And so would all the other citizens of Moseby be scared—away from the polls. . . .



ONCE again Ty noted the firmness of Kitty Poley's chin. She sat across the table and the friendly light of the lamp was between them. She

said, "Doctor Morgan will stay until we know—about Tom."

Ty said, "Eightball's gone for the ranchers. They should be ridin' in any-time, now."

"I'm keeping them here," she said flatly.

Ty nodded, aware of her beauty, her strength. She could manage them from loud Al Canniff to tough old Pops Crichton. He said, "If they attack Moseby there'll be people hurt that ain't in on it. It'll leave a scar that will never heal."

Kitty said, "We'll send Downer to Sullivan for trial in the county court. Then we must plan against Felsch and Tilfair."

Ty shook his head. "The elections are too soon. They've got the town cowed. We can't win."

"We must win!" she cried. "If they gain control of the courts, we are all ruined."

"I know. There's only one way. I'll go in tonight and rid the earth of them." He kept his gaze cast down. He did not want to look at her too long.

She said softly, "You would sacrifice yourself to get us out of this jackpot, wouldn't you, Ty?"

He said, "It's nothing. . . . What have I got to lose? The Judge has already sent back word to Georgia. I'm a killer, Kitty. I shot George Hayworth. I killed two men in Moseby today. There's a mark on me."

"Tom had plans for you," she said. "When the elections were over he meant for you to take charge here in his absence on sheriff business. Tom thinks you are smart and knows that you get along with men—and women."

Ty said, "They'll be extraditing me. Tilfair fixed the jury. I'll have to go back."

She shook her head impatiently. "No one ever goes back from Texas if he's established here!"

"It's no use," Ty said softly. "You and Tom have been good to me. I'm goin', Kitty. I'm doin' it to keep peace in the county."

"You'll get killed!" she said. "Moseby is an armed camp, the doctor says."

Ty laughed gently. "I'm hard to kill. They treat that in the jail. They don't

like planters' sons in jails. But they never quite finished me!"

He got up and took a gun from a table against the wall. He spun the cylinders thoughtfully. It was Tom's six-shooter. He let the hammer down upon the empty and thrust it into his belt. His own weapon was in its holster. He picked up his soft sombrero and said, "I'm goin' alone, Kitty. See that Tenstrike stays here. He couldn't help."

She arose and stepped towards him. "You are not a killer. You are a kind, gentle person. I don't like this. Wait for the ranchers to ride in, then. Let it be their war, too."

He said, "You know that ain't right." He touched her on the shoulder gently, and walked past her.

She called, "I won't have this, Ty Merrick!"

But she had to nurse Tom, Ty knew. He walked to the corral and amazingly the dun, Muddy, threw up his head and whinnied. Ty cast his rope and Muddy made no more than a coltish effort to evade it. In the starlight, with a moon riding behind a shallow cloud the wild horse was easier to saddle than the blue roan on an oat-ish day!

Ty muttered, "Mebbe it's an omen. The darkies back home would say so. Get on there, Muddy! They don't know you in Moseby, anyhow!"

Ty avoided the road, striking across the flat lands and steering by the stars. Muddy loved the rough going, flying with magic feet past cactus and greasewood, threading the prairie dog holes, never stumbling nor faltering. The lights of Moseby were a flickering reflection against the brightening sky and Ty drew rein at the doctor's house.

He had a little trouble getting Muddy into the stall. Ty departed hoping that he would not find a stall kicked to pieces

and empty when he returned, if ever. He stole up towards Aguila Street.

He gained the vantage point of the store's porch which he had utilized earlier and settled into deep shadows to watch and think. There were no signs of everyday civilian life upon the main street. The imported ruffians still marched back and forth, drinking in every bar but inevitably returning to the Jack O' Diamonds. It was a distinct advantage that none of these strangers would recognize Ty Merrick.

From this thought came his plan of procedure. He arose, chuckling as he made instant decision. The recklessness which lay dormant in him until action impended flared into being and he was transformed, swaggering down to the board walk, his hat pulled low on the bridge of his hawk nose.

He progressed slowly towards the Jack O' Diamonds. Two of the strangers, wearing twin guns slung low, stared at him. Ty said, "Howdy, men. Is it near time to go?"

The scar-faced one said, "I dunno. Jack's stallin' around with the fat Jedge. Let's hist one."

Ty said, "How bad is Roche hit?"

The scar-faced man shrugged. "The doc ain't back so we reckon he's alive. We got to finish him and git Downer. Felsch says they won't hang Downer without a jury. Damn fools!"

Ty said, "I'll buy. Let's go in here."

They entered a small Mexican bistro at the end of the street. Ty paused a moment, smiling, but keen-eyed, glancing around. He recognized no one in the bar. They ordered tequila and the fiery liquid burned Ty's throat. The two men were laconic but accepted him as one of the imported guns. An hour passed and Ty managed to dump some of his tequila into the sand at his feet and the two gunmen grew drunk.

For another unusual story like the one you are now reading, don't miss William R. Cox in the next issue. His feature novel is about a phantom-like ranch that puts a strange curse on every cattleman who buys it. . . . March 10 STORY WESTERN on sale Feb. 11th!

Scarface said finally, "I'm outa cash. Guess we got to see Jack agin. He's sure spendin'!"

Ty said, "Me too. Let's go!"



THIS was what he had been awaiting. He fell in step on the inside of the walk, where the light was poorest, and trudged along with his two unsteady companions. He said, "There's some of these culls ain't right people, I reckon you-all know. Jack got anybody he could, o' course."

"Whaddayamean, pardner?" demanded Scarface.

"Saddle bums!" said Ty with an expansive gesture. "Cheap guns from Nowhere—and ain't goin' nowhere. Never seen the inside of a solitary."

Scarface said, "You got the pen lingo, partner. I did mine in Kansas."

The other man said hoarsely, "You should try it in Texas!"

Ty said, "Got to stick together. Some of these skunks—" He waved his arms. "I'd like to show a couple of them!"

They were in front of the Jack O' Diamonds. Scarface said with drunken beligerence, "I'm with yuh, pard!"

They burst through the doors. There were fifty fighting men in the room, swirling about in great excitement. For the moment there was no sign of Jack Felsch's black visage nor the corpulent features of the Judge. Ty and his new friends bellied up to the bar and cleared a space. A rat-faced man showed yellow fangs in protest. Scarface shoved him ten feet.

Against the rear wall, ever watchful, Ty saw Hideout Kaley looking strangely alone without Downer at his side. There were other sober men with basilisk eyes scattered here and there. Kaley's attention for the moment was upon a group of hilarious gamblers at the faro table, but Ty knew it was only a matter of moments before he was discovered.

He eased the revolver in his belt so that it would come readily to his grasp when the holstered weapon was emptied. If he lived to get hold of Tom's gun, he thought, he would certainly have accomplished his mission.

He disposed of another drink, shaking

his head to clear his vision. Scarface was noisily demanding to see Jack Felsch and the barkeep was scowling. The rat-faced man was sullen, standing by, glaring at Scarface.

Kaley was beginning to lose interest in the faro game.

Ty turned his back upon the thin gunman and said argumentatively, "That rat keeps lookin' at you, Scarface. Let's slap him down."

Scarface wheeled on the ratlike man. He said, "Go dry yourself behind the ears."

The villainous one responded by diving for his gun with great celerity. Ty promptly hit him on the head with a bottle from the bar. Scarface grabbed the falling body and roaring with laughter heaved it at several of the men who were closing in, blood in their eyes at this treatment of their comrade. Scarface's silent friend punched the nearest of the oncoming gents on the jaw.

Ty ducked low in the seething crowd which surged immediately into action. He managed to dispose of two who tried ganging up from Scarface's rear. The silent member was down on the floor, rolling, kicking, biting, gouging.

Scarface whooped, "I'm a cyclone from Kansas and I'll blow the damn place down! Whoopee!"

Kaley and the others were diving into it, knocking men right and left with their gun barrels. As yet it was all half-good-natured, rough play among rough men, without a gunshot. Ty, his back to the bar, fended off the pushing mob and waited his time.

Kaley spun and for a moment was stopped. He thrashed around, a thin man without the beef to make himself felt in the crowd. His angry eyes fell full upon Ty. He stared, then wailed, "It's Mer-rick! Get him, the damned mutt!"

Ty hollered, "Scarface! They're startin' it!"

He held his gun waist high and pulled the trigger. A man screamed and fell away. Kaley had ducked in time. Ty mounted the bar in one leap, drawing his second gun. He called, "This way, Scarface! The skunks are after us!"

The silent man came up off the floor, an ear torn half away, wild with rage. He

pulled his guns and the barrage was opened. Ty dropped behind the bar as Scarface again roared defiance. In a moment they were all fighting each other and no man knew the reason why.

Ty slapped the bartender as that worthy raised his shotgun, and the muzzle of his gun laid the man among the barrels of cheap whiskey beneath the mahogany. Then Ty doubled over and ran for the rear room where he had first encountered Jack Felsch. He paused long enough to shoot out the lights and then dove head first through the door.

He landed in the arms of Hideout Kaley and two giant gunmen. He fired one futile shot, and then they had him safe, holding his arms. He cried, "Scarface! This way!" but they clapped dirty hands over his mouth and tied him and threw him upon a straight chair and stood over him.

Behind the desk, Jack Felsch sat quietly, two guns before him. The Judge was pale, but managed to glare from his deep chair. For a moment there was only the sound outside of men threshing around, afraid to shoot now for fear of hurting their friends, tearing the Jack O' Diamonds to bits, but causing no further damage to the cause, Ty thought with sinking heart. He had almost managed it. He had failed only because Hideout Kaley had been too quick in dodging and escaping.

CHAPTER FIVE

That Georgia Gun!

JACK FELSCH said without emotion, "You've played hell out there, haven't you, Merrick? Been having one hell of a time for yourself, haven't you?"

Tilfair choked, "Stop them! You've got to stop them, Jack. They'll kill each other off."

The noise had subsided but little. Felsch said, "You want to go out there and get into it, Judge?"

Scarface kept calling, "Geo'gia! Where's my partner, Geo'gia?"

The nearest big man held Ty's mouth shut. The other produced a dirty handkerchief and they crammed it into his jaws. He fought them, enduring their kicks and punches, endeavoring only to

keep the men out in the bar stirred up.

Felsch stood up, one of the guns balanced in his hand. He was blacker than ever, his eyes, his hair, his habiliments blending into an ebon figure of doom. He said harshly, "I've built this up for years. I picked Tilfair to push it over for me. I had this county, this State in my hands until you blundered in here, you damned fool. Do you think you can get away with it?"

He raised the revolver and the big men fell away from either side. Ty struggled to his feet, his arms bound behind him, determined to meet death squarely.

Tilfair croaked, "That's right, Jack. Kill him. I wash my hands of him. Kill the jackanapes!"

Felsch's gaze drifted momentarily to the panic-stricken Judge. He sneered, "You're a great help. You brought him here to begin with. I'm getting damned sick of this. All my work, all my investments going to nothing!"

He swung the revolver about and Tilfair turned a saffron hue, his jaw dropping open. He stammered, "We—we can pull it out. We've got the town. The—the ranchers will ride in and we'll ambush them!"

"We!" said Felsch. "We! You'll be under a bed somewhere, you fat fool!" He glowered hatred at his companion in crime.

Ty bent his knees.

Scarface, just outside the door, was yelling, "Make a light, boys! They've got my partner somewheres!"

The two big men turned to the portal, ready for action. Felsch's gaze was still upon the Judge. Ty dipped down, got his feet solidly under him and leaped straight outward. He was bound so that he could not move a hand. But he thrust his head before him and swam over the desk to where Felsch held the gun ready for action.

He butted into Felsch's middle, felt the man go back. The two giants swore and started across the room. Tilfair became aware of his personal danger from Felsch and his men and bolted across the room. He banged into the two big men and Hideout Kaley slid in through the door saying, "They're calmin' down a bit. If I can kill that Scarface—"

Then Kaley was in the melee around the Judge. Ty had thrown his feet around and slid off the desk erect. One foot came up in a sharp kick at Felsch's wrist. The gun flew away and slapped against the boards of the floor. Kaley yelled, "What in hell's goin' on?"

Ty's second kick caught Felsch in the stomach. The black-hued man doubled over, gasping, unable to talk. Ty mercilessly kicked him again, on the jaw, and Felsch went down. The gag was choking him now, but Ty whirled and dove back across the desk.

Kaley said, "You dirty son!" His gun was clear, coming up. Ty ran blindly into it. He had no thought of getting out of this, and his only hope was to rouse the drink-fuddled but warlike faction supporting Scarface.

Kaley's eyes narrowed, he squeezed at his trigger. There was a loud explosion, another. Ty ducked and dove.

Miraculously, he was not hurt. He found himself shouldering Kaley to the wall. There was another shot, and a third. A voice said, "Get down, Ty!"

Kaley was glassy-eyed, his gun at his side. The two big men were flopping about, bleeding. The window sash fell with a clatter. Tenstrike's familiar accents said, "They got him tied!"

Ty staggered back, staring. Kitty Poley was pale, but she carefully managed the divided skirt, climbing through the window. The Judge was flat against the wall, his hands upraised, trembling, staring down at the three dead men on the floor.

From outside, Scarface howled, "They're a-shootin' my partner! Lemme in there!"

Tenstrike's Barlow slashed Ty loose from his bonds, from the gag. He said, "It's all dark out there and everyone's a-squabblin'. How did ye manage it, Ty?"

Ty had only eyes for the girl. He said, "You're alone? Just you and Tenstrike?"

"I had to come," she said. "Tom took a turn for the better. He said I should come—alone."

Ty blinked at tears which came unbidden. He said rapidly, "Open the door. Hold your guns ready. Let me talk to Scarface."

He dashed behind the desk, jerked Jack

Felsch from the floor and jammed him into his chair. The man flopped grotesquely, but Ty managed to plank his head on folded arms.

He picked up a gun and turned to Judge Tilfair. He said, "You back me, or so help us, we'll carve you into steaks!"

Tenstrike pulled open the door. Scarface and his laconic friend and a half dozen others stood blinking at the flood of light from the office. Ty said smoothly, "Jack's dead drunk. He had bad news—the governor's sendin' Rangers to calm things down."

A man called, "That's Merrick! He's a rancher!"



THE Judge stared at Ty's gun, which was aimed carelessly but accurately at his protuberant belly. He staggered forward and raised a hand. He said, "Merrick is right. We have, with great success, arranged a—er—a truce. We do not want trouble with the governor, gentlemen!"

"To hell with the governor!" shouted a big man with a hard mouth. "Let's git started and run things ourselves, like Jack promised!"

"Get him," Ty snapped at Scarface. That worthy turned and slammed his gun muzzle against the recalcitrant's head. Ty called, "Make a light and stand up to the bar. Drinks are on the house until we sober up Jack!"

Scarface turned them. He had a knack of leadership, this drifter from Kansas, Ty saw with something near to amusement. A dozen candles were found and dimly illuminated the bar. Ty turned and said:

"They're quiet for now."

Kitty and Tenstrike were standing out of view, holding guns. The Judge collapsed like a punctured balloon. He moistened his lips once, started to speak, failed. Ty closed the door again and put his back to it.

The Judge succeeded in whispering, "You—you're going to murder us?"

Ty was watching the man at the desk. Kitty and Tenstrike stood there in stony silence. They were in Moseby to aid in killing two great malefactors, men re-

sponsible for many deaths. The moment had come and neither Kitty nor Tenstrike could look Ty in the eye.

Ty glanced down at the gun in his hand. It was the one they had taken from him. He wondered what they had done with Tom's gun. He stood stock still, watching Jack Felsch, totally ignoring the slavering fat lawyer from Georgia who mouthed a disjointed plea for mercy.

Ty said clearly, "It's a job that needs doing while Scarface is in control of the men out there."

He saw Felsch's arm contract. He had known for moments that Felsch was conscious and ready for action. He said, "I'll give you first shot, Judge. Grab a gun and help yourself."

It was dangerous, with Kitty in the room, but it was the only way. He distracted Tenstrike's and Kitty's attention to the flaccid-kneed Judge. He saw Felsch slide one arm down beneath the desk and knew that Tom's gun was on the floor.

Tilfair said, "I give up! I'll leave town. Anything! Don't shoot me, Tyrus!"

"Pick up a gun!" said Ty. "I'll give you a fair chance. One, two—three!"

Felsch reared back, coming erect with Tom's gun. He looked straight into Ty's face. He cocked the weapon before Ty made a move. Then Ty said calmly, "I'm giving you the same chance, Jack!"

Felsch threw down. Ty moved gently to one side, fired without haste. Felsch's gun roared and acrid smoke filled the narrow confines of the room. Kitty cried out and Tenstrike muttered a curse.

Ty fired once more. Felsch dropped Tom's gun. His two hands gripped the edge of the desk, he leaned far forward, staring at Ty. Then his glance wandered, fixed upon Judge Tilfair. A ghastly grin came over his dying face. He said, "Well, well—didn't miss after all! Got me a companion—all the way to hell!"

Ty turned, frowning. Judge Tilfair was down in a heap, a fat man melted among his clothing to a pitiable mass, the blood running over his soiled waistcoat.

Tenstrike said, "Missed you and got the Judge, Ty!"

Jack Felsch's hands slipped and his

forehead thumped on the desk top.

In the bar, Scarface was shouting, "Don't pay no 'tention to that foolishness in yonder. My Geo'gia partner's got it all under control!"

Ty said grimly, "If we leave by the window they'll drink all night and wake up to find these dead people in the morning. Sober, they'll light a shuck."

Kitty was silent, pale. Tenstrike caught up the horses and they walked through the night to the doctor's house where Muddy whinnied with impatience. Kitty followed Ty into the stable.

She said, "Tom's conscious and talking straight. He wants you to come quick and take over."

Ty said, "Tom's a great man."

She looked away from him. She said in a low voice, "You were fighting them, tied and gagged, helpless, but still fighting them. Yet you are not a hell-for-leather gunman. What manner of man are you, Ty Merrick?"

He said, "Just a man from Georgia . . . Kitty, the blue roan's a good horse. Do you reckon—would it be all right if I took Muddy? It's a swap. Would Tom care?"

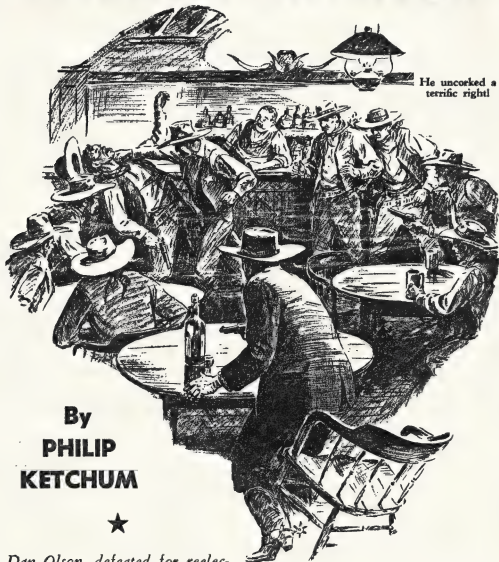
She stood a long moment in silence. Then she held out her hand in the old, almost masculine gesture. "You're a very smart man. I love Tom and I'm going to marry him . . . Come and see us, after we are settled, won't you, Ty?"

He said, "Surest thing you know . . . Say good-bye to Tenstrike for me, will you? I ain't much on good-byes."

He swung into the saddle. Tenstrike blinked in amazement as the dun horse and rider went by. Ty's arm flung up and once more the rebel yell sounded in Moseby's quiet streets. Then he was gone, and Kitty Poley's tears streamed unchecked down her cheeks.

But on the road to the west Ty Merrick rode alone, and within him was not too much unhappiness. He left behind a town on the eve of throwing off an evil bondage. He left friends, he left good deeds well done. The walls of the solitary in Georgia were not so plain in his consciousness. He gently stroked the neck of Muddy and cantered across rolling land in quest of another day.

SHERIFF-MAKER



He uncorked a terrific right!

By
**PHILIP
KETCHUM**



Dan Olson, defeated for reelection to his beloved sheriff's office, was determined to make the incoming lawman worthy of the star—if he had to kill him to do it!



THEY had the ceremony at noon on the steps of the courthouse. After Joe Manning had been sworn in as the new sheriff, Dan Olson pushed his way through the crowd to congratulate the man who had beaten him in the election. Afterwards, Dan headed for the sheriff's office and finished cleaning out his desk.

Lem Hardesty dropped in and watched him. Hardesty was nearing sixty. He

was almost twice as old as Dan. He was bald and a little stooped. He had come to this part of the country when a man had had to keep a constant vigil against the Indians and had seen this town of Weed grow up around a broken supply wagon.

"Maybe you're sort of glad you lost out, Dan," Hardesty said finally. "Maybe you're looking ahead to the days when you can starve to death on that ranch you bought up on the mesa."

Dan grinned. "Maybe you're right, Lem. Maybe I'm tickled plumb silly."

The older man was scowling. He shook his head. "I don't like it."

"You don't like what?"

"I don't like the man who beat you."

"Joe Manning's all right."

Lem Hardesty crossed over to the window and stared out into the dusty street. "Manning's weak," he said slowly. "He's yellow. Before a week's passed, Willard will have him on the run. Maybe he won't like it, but he'll play Willard's game. I know what's ahead, Dan, and it ain't pretty."

A thoughtful look came into Dan's eyes. He was a tall young man, slender. There was a thin, white scar across his forehead, the mark of an outlaw's bullet. The fellow responsible for it had made the mistake of thinking that Dan's slow and deliberate way of tackling a problem represented timidity. The outlaw was dead.

"I'm licked, sure as shootin'," Hardesty went on. "That's the way it adds up, Dan."

Dan Olson shook his head. He didn't think things were as bad as Hardesty insisted. Frank Willard was ambitious, it was true, but so far he had shown no inclination to cause trouble. He was a newcomer to this part of the country, had been here only two years. He had managed to buy a good deal of the land south of Weed, and if he could would probably invade the territory to the north, but Olson was pretty well entrenched. Even if Willard controlled the sheriff's office he wouldn't find it easy.

"Go get your horse and mine, Lem," Dan suggested. "We'll talk it over while we ride. Maybe you'll put me up for the night."

Lem Hardesty shrugged and left the

office and after he had gone Dan walked to the door and stared up the street. There was a crowd in front of Blutman's saloon and around the hotel. A few women were visible on the street. Horses lined the hitching rails. Dan guessed that probably every man and woman who lived within fifty miles of Weed and who could get away, had come to town. Farther up the street a platform had been built and after dark there would be a dance.

"Hi, Dan," called a voice. "You gave us a good fight. If it hadn't been that Joe was one of my boys I think I'd been for you."

Dan turned and looked at the man approaching him. Frank Willard was younger than Olsen. He didn't wear the usual every-day clothing of most men in this part of the country. He had on a dark suit and white shirt with a wide, black bowtie. He was clean shaven, short and slender and had dark, steady eyes. He wasn't smiling. He was a man who seldom smiled.

"That's all right, Willard," Dan said easily.

"Any plans for the future?" Willard asked. "I could use a good man."

"Thanks, but I've a ranch on the mesa. I'm really going to work."

"If you need any help, let me know."

Dan nodded. He watched Willard move on up the street. Near the store he was joined by Bill Potter and Ed Krick, two of his riders. Dan didn't know Potter and Krick very well. They had arrived here only a few weeks before and hadn't been to town very often.

The first time he had run into them, at Blutman's, they had frozen up at the sight of him and hadn't seemed comfortable as long as he was in the saloon. They were hard-looking characters. Dan had a notion they were on the dodge, but from what he couldn't guess. None of the posters in his office described them. Willard and the two men turned into Blutman's.

Dan left that door and walked back to the desk. His personal belongings were in a package on top of it. The files and the desk were otherwise in order. There wasn't any reason, he supposed, why he should wait here for Joe Manning to take over, but he had hardly had a chance to

see Joe since the election and he didn't want to hurry off too fast.

A scowl crossed his face as he waited. He didn't like to admit that Hardesty was right in his appraisal of Joe Manning, but if he was honest with himself he would have to admit he was a little worried about the man. He had known Joe a long time. Joe was easy going perhaps, and lazy. It was hard to imagine him in a job like this. Dan could only figure out one reason why he had run for sheriff. Joe was in love with a girl in Mesquite, a town a hundred miles south. On a cowhand's wages he couldn't get married. As a sheriff, he could.

The sudden, muffled spatter of gunfire stiffened every muscle in Dan's body. He jerked toward the door and had reached the edge of the porch before he recalled he was no longer the sheriff—and that this trouble, whatever it was, didn't concern him.

The crowd in front of Blutman's had increased. Everyone on the street seemed headed that way. Dan Olson scowled. He caught a glimpse of Doc Sprague hurrying toward the saloon. The crowd in front of the door let the doctor through.



DAN fingered his gun. He drew it from its holster, looked at it and then put it away. After a time he sat down on the edge of the porch. Slim Rothmeyer came bursting from the crowd. He had lost his hat. He angled straight for the sheriff's office and as he drew near Dan could see the tight, strained expression on his face. Rothmeyer was breathing heavily as he pulled up in front of Dan Olson. His eyes were dark with anger.

"They got him, Dan," he said bluntly, the words grating in his throat. "They cornered him, badgered him into reaching for his gun and then Krick shot him. He didn't have a chance. Potter lunged against him as he went for his gun."

Dan had come to his feet. "Lunged against who, Slim?"

"Hardesty."

"You mean Lem Hardesty's been shot?"

"He's dead. I saw the whole thing. It

was murder, Dan. As deliberate as if they had shot him in the back."

Dan left the porch and took a couple steps toward Blutman's. He stopped and looked back at Rothmeyer. "Where's Joe Manning?"

"In one of the back rooms. Drunk." There was a bitter note in Rothmeyer's voice. "What the hell can Manning do, anyhow?"

Dan's lips tightened. He moved on up the street. There was a tight jam in front of the saloon's door. Dan reached out and jerked a fellow out of the way. He used his elbows on a couple more. It took him only a moment to get inside. The saloon wasn't crowded. Dan noticed that a couple of Willard's riders had been stationed at the door, holding others outside. How deliberate that was he couldn't guess. Blutman, himself, might have given the order which sent those two men there. Blutman ran this place in a pretty arbitrary manner.

Willard and Ed Krick and Bill Potter and a few others were standing in a group near a silent figure on the floor. Doc Sprague was with them. Sprague was scowling. Dan had a notion that Krick and Potter had stiffened as they saw him come in but Willard showed no feelings at all.

"What happened?" Dan asked flatly.

Frank Willard took off his hat. He looked down at the figure of the man on the floor. "It was just one of those things, Dan. Ed Krick and I and a few others were standing at the bar when Hardesty came in. He found a place near Krick and the two of them had words. Hardesty went for his gun. He wasn't quick enough."

Dan made no answer. He kept looking at Willard until Willard looked up, then after a moment he shifted his glance to Krick and then to Potter. There was a tight sneer on Krick's thick, ugly face.

"I don't like things like this," Willard went on. "Hardesty was clearly to blame but I still don't like it."

Dan Olson sucked in a long, slow breath. "I don't like it, either, and I'm not so sure as you are that Hardesty was to blame."

A sudden tension came over the group in front of him. For a moment there

wasn't a sound in the saloon, then Willard spoke. "Meaning what, Dan?"

"Meaning I'd like to ask a few other people questions," Dan answered.

A brief smile, quickly gone, passed over Willard's face. "Wouldn't that be up to the sheriff?"

Somewhere in the room a man laughed. Dan moistened his lips. He wanted to bull right ahead and play this hand out his own way, play it as he would have played it if he had still been sheriff. But that wasn't the way. Joe Manning had been elected sheriff and this was Manning's problem. It had to be. The way Manning faced this would determine where he stood, would keynote the law in this valley for as long as he held office.

"Maybe you ought to talk this over with the new sheriff, Dan," Willard continued. "You'll find him in the back room. He ain't—feeling so good."

Again that man laughed. Dan looked around. The fellow who was so amused was one of those who had stood at the door, one of Willard's riders. Dan's glance fell from him to the silent figure on the floor, and he made his decision. Turning, he headed for the back room.

Manning was there alone. He sat at a table, the upper part of his body leaning over it. He was snoring drunkenly. Perspiration trickled from his flushed face.

Dan closed the door by which he had entered. He tried to shake Manning awake but with no success. Slim Rothmeyer came in. Rothmeyer was still seething with anger.

"Hell, Dan, let him go," Rothmeyer growled. "If you want any backing, I'll stand with you when you take those men on. You see what it means, don't you? With Hardesty out of the way, Willard can spread out north. If he's stopped at all, he's got to be stopped sharp and sudden."

Dan nodded. He stepped to the window and opened it. "I'll climb out," he said to Rothmeyer. "Shove Joe Manning through the window after me."

"For Pete's sake, why?"

"We're going to sober him up."

Rothmeyer blew up at that but Dan didn't argue with the man. He climbed through the window and waited. After a minute Rothmeyer boosted Manning's

big, loose body through the opening.

♦ ♦ ♦

MAUD SANDERS was the widow of Weed's first sheriff. She had come here as a bride, had seen her husband shot down before he was thirty, had hurried to his side, picked up his gun and shot the man who had killed him. Since then, and that was close to a quarter of a century ago, she had gone on living in the house Bill Sanders had built for her, earning her living by dressmaking, washing clothes, and occasionally renting out a room. She was thin, sharp tongued and a woman of little patience. Half of the men in the valley were a little afraid of her, most of the women thought her queer.

Everyone had been amazed when Dan Olson rented a room from her, steady. Maud Sanders had been a little amazed herself. She had thought she would never want a man around the place day in and day out, but she soon discovered that having Dan around was a little like it had been in the old days with her husband. Dan talked over his problems with her much as Bill had. It made her feel like she had a part in things again. She had been almost ill when Dan lost the election. Even his promise to try and get Joe Manning to room with her hadn't helped out much.

She was sitting on her porch the afternoon Manning was sworn in, wondering if she ought to sell her place and move back east to her sister's home when she saw Dan Olson and Slim Rothmeyer cutting across toward her home. They were supporting the sagging figure of another man between them. Maud Sanders frowned. She stood up when they turned in the gate.

"I told you I'd bring him, Mrs. Sanders," Dan grinned. "Here he is, the new sheriff."

Maud Sanders recalled the shot she had heard. "Hurt already?" she gasped.

Dan shook his head. "Not much."

They were coming up the steps, now, and Maud Sanders caught the smell of Manning's breath. Her body stiffened and a flash of anger showed in her eyes.

"Drunk!" she said sharply. "A fine

thing for a man sworn to uphold the law. What do you think you're doing, Dan Olson? You're not going to bring that man in here."

"Go fill the tub with cold water, Mrs. Sanders," Dan ordered. "And put a pot of coffee on. The biggest pot you've got. Make it strong."

Maud Sanders blocked the doorway with her body. "I will not. Take him away from here."

"This man is the sheriff, Mrs. Sanders," Dan said bluntly. "He's got a job to do and he's in no shape to do it. Go fill that tub."

For an instant Maud Sanders didn't budge, then something in what Dan had said reached her. She turned and entered the house. . . .

A good many men had witnessed the procession up the street. Word of it was relayed to the crowd in Blutman's and to those in the Wagon Wheel and the Palace saloon. The men sitting on the porch of the hotel talked over what Dan Olson had said to Willard and the way he had taken the newly elected sheriff up the street to Maud Sanders'. There was a good deal of speculation over what he had done and why and what would happen later on.

The afternoon passed and the supper hour. Twilight settled down from the sky and then thickened into the purple shadows of evening. The men who had been hired to play for the dance that night took their places on the platform and started tuning up their fiddles. A few men and women headed that way, but not many. A strange uneasiness was settling over the town. Folks kept their eyes on the gaunt, weather-beaten house owned by Maud Sanders. Since Dan Olson, Rothmeyer and the sheriff had entered it, there had been no sign from any of them.

Lem Hardesty's riders had come to Weed. They had learned what had happened to their boss and they were a cold, stony-faced bunch. But they kept clear of Willard's men. It was rumored that Slim Rothmeyer had brought them a message from Dan Olson.

There was a good deal of talk about Dan Olson during the early evening. Men were recalling his exploits as sheriff, were recalling his friendship with Hardesty,

were recalling the deliberate, stubborn way he had of tackling things.

In Blutman's, Frank Willard sat at a table nursing a drink. His face showed no anxiety. At another table in the room, Bill Potter, Ed Krick and three more of his men played poker, but their mind didn't seem to be on the game. They would look up quickly each time the door opened. Most of the others in Blutman's were Willard's men. Occasionally a man would drift in from the street, say something to Willard and then move out again.

Red Barnhill, who was Willard's top-hand, stopped at his boss's table and shook his head. "You moved too fast, Frank. It looked crude. People are talkin' about it."

"To hell with what people are talking about," Willard answered. "I'm only interested in what they do."

"And Dan Olson's bad medicine."

"He's no longer sheriff."

"That might not stop him, Frank."

Willard shrugged. "Maybe not, but if he starts anything, there's enough of us to handle it. And it'll be a private matter. Olson isn't the law any more."

Barnhill scowled. "I wish I knew what he was doing with Joe Manning."

"Why worry about that? Manning worked for me. He had my backing for sheriff. He knows where he takes his orders and if he doesn't, it's time he learned."



JOE MANNING was learning right at that moment. He was sitting at a table in Maud Sanders' kitchen. Dan Olson was across from him and Mrs. Sanders was at one side. There was a cup of coffee in front of him. It was black, strong and hot. Manning had emptied the cup so many times he had lost count of the number. He was beginning to build up a sharp hatred of coffee.

"Drink it," Dan said flatly.

Manning bit his lips. There was a swelling under his right eye and a cut on his jaw. He had tried to argue with Dan in the bathroom. For a while it had been a swell argument. There was a cut on Dan's cheek, too. But in the end Manning was dumped into the cold tub again.

"Drink it," Dan said again.

Manning lifted the cup to his lips. He drank about half of it. At a nod from Dan, Maud Sanders filled the cup to the brim from a pot on the stove.

"Isn't that damned pot ever going to get emptied," Manning grumbled.

Dan said, "Hold out your hand."

Manning stretched out his hand. It wasn't very steady. Dan shook his head. "You wouldn't have a chance. Keep on drinking that java."

Manning scowled. "I'll never get any steadier. Why can't I wait until tomorrow."

"Tomorrow will be too late," Dan answered. "Tomorrow, men would laugh at you. You've got to act tonight."

The back door opened and Slim Rothmeyer came in. He walked through the kitchen to the front of the house. Dan got up and followed him.

"There's three of 'em out front," Rothmeyer said under his breath. "Willard's men. A couple more spaced along the street. Willard, himself, is at Blutman's. So are Krick and Potter and maybe six or eight more. Hardesty's men are drinking and getting impatient. The town's as tight as a drum."

Dan rolled a cigarette. He made no comment.

"How's Manning?" Slim Rothmeyer asked.

"More sober than he looks and mad enough to be ugly," Dan answered. "He can use a gun, Rothmeyer, and his fists too. I saw him tear loose once when he was cornered in El Paso. As it happened, I was flat on my back with a bullet through my shoulder. I wasn't supposed to leave that place alive. Joe Manning got me out."

"So that's why you're doing this for him."

"Maybe. Or maybe it's because I've seen the girl in Mesquite he's in love with. She's a nice kid, blue-eyed. She's got a smile that does things to you."

Rothmeyer grunted. He peered through the window. "How'll we handle the men outside?"

"We'll pull 'em away."

"Pull 'em away."

"Yeah. We'll go on ahead of Manning. Those men'll figure we couldn't sober him up. They'll follow us to Blutman's."

"And what do we do when we get to Blutman's?" Rothmeyer asked sarcastically. "Hell, Dan. They're down there just prayin' that we'll come walkin' in. Even if we could get there and stall, what makes you think Manning would follow us?"

"He'll follow."

"We could do it better alone."

Dan shook his head. "We're just staggin' this thing, Rothmeyer. Manning's the sheriff and you know as well as I do how

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I SHAVE WITH
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important a sheriff is to this country. He's the law. He's got to be strong. He's got to carry the load. We can't do it for him. No one can."

Rothmeyer looked doubtful. He bit his lips. Dan swung around and went back to the kitchen.

"We've leaving, Joe," Dan said slowly. "Slim Rothmeyer and I are heading down the street for a drink. What you do from here on out, is up to you. A few hours ago Lem Hardesty was shot. The man who killed him is in Blutman's, playing cards. Maybe he killed Hardesty in a fair fight but there are some who think he didn't. It's up to you to arrest him and hold him for trial. That's what any sheriff worth his salt would do. That's what every decent man in Weed expects of you. If you try to crawl out you might just as well fork your horse and ride west, only fast as you ride you'll never be able to get ahead of your conscience."

Joe Manning flushed. He jerked suddenly to his feet. "To hell with you, Olson. Take your preaching to someone else."

"Sure, Joe." Dan shrugged. "So long. If you sneak out the back way maybe no one will notice."

Turning abruptly on his heel, Dan left the room.



A MAN hurried into Blutman's and angled toward Willard's table. "They're coming," he said under his breath. "They're down the street just a little ways."

"All three of them?" Willard asked.

"Just two. Mannings not with them."

A tight smile crossed Willard's lips.

The other three men at the table looked toward the door. There was money on the table. The hand had been dealt yet no one picked up the cards.

The door swung open and Dan Olson and Rothmeyer stepped into the saloon. The five at the poker table sat motionless.

Dan let his slow glance rake from one side of the room to the other. There wasn't anything unusual in the expression on his face. He glanced at Rothmeyer and said, "Over here," and angled toward a table at one side. Rothmeyer nodded

and followed him. In a perfect silence the two men sat down.

A minute passed and then another. Dan rolled a cigarette. He worked on it carefully and as though nothing else in the world were on his mind. The silence in the room built up until he could feel it beating against his ears. At the poker table a chair creaked and Ed Krick came to his feet, his hands hovering over his guns, a tight, strained expression on his face.

"Sit down, Ed," Willard snapped.

Ed Krick moistened his lips. His jaw wagged up and down but no words came from his throat.

"Sit down, Ed," Willard said again.

Ed Krick sank slowly into his chair. His face was beady with perspiration.

"Well, Olson?" Willard demanded.

Dan Olson looked over at the man. "Speaking to me?" he asked quietly.

Willard stood up. He didn't look quite so calm now. "You know I am," he grated. "What do you want?"

Dan grinned. "Are you working here now, Willard? If you are, we'll have two beers."

Willard took a step forward and then stopped. His hands were tightly clenched. "You made a remark this afternoon, Olson. I didn't like it."

Dan shrugged. He tongued his cigarette, placed it in the corner of his mouth, reached into his vest pocket for a match and lighted it. "You told me to see the sheriff, didn't you?" he inquired. "Well, I did."

Willard sucked in a long, slow breath. He couldn't seem to think of anything to say.

Rothmeyer called, "Hey, Blutman, how about some beer."

Blutman put down his glass. He drew two mugs of beer and brought them to Dan's table, took the money Rothmeyer offered him and walked back to the bar. Dan wasn't paying any more attention to Willard. He sampled the beer and nodded in approval.

Willard was still on his feet, scowling at Dan and Rothmeyer. The men at the poker table and the others hadn't moved.

"Think he'll ever come?" Rothmeyer asked under his breath.

"He'll come," Dan answered.

A MINUTE passed and then another. There still were no sounds in the saloon. Dan wanted to look around at Willard. He wanted to see how the men at the poker table were standing this but he forced himself to keep his eyes away from them.

The door to the back room suddenly opened and a man stepped into the saloon. Dan looked that way. Everyone else was looking that way, too. An audible gasp came from Willard's throat. Ed Krick again came to his feet. Dan looked at him and then at Willard and the others. On every face he could see he could read the shock these men were feeling. For it was Joe Manning who had come in through that back door and they had figured Manning out of it.

Manning's face was pale and drawn except for the swelling under his eye and the cut on his jaw.

"I want you, Krick," he said flatly. "Don't reach for your gun. Unbuckle your belt and drop it."

Krick was hunched over. Dan could hear the sound of the man's harsh breathing.

"Look here, Joe," Willard said, his voice a little high and unnatural. "You've got things all wrong. It was a fair fight. You can't arrest a man for protecting himself."

Joe didn't even look at Willard. "Maybe it was a fair fight," he answered. "Maybe not. It's up to the judge to decide. Until then, I've got to arrest Ed Krick."

In the silence which followed that statement, Dan Olson gave his table a little push. The sound wasn't much but it served to remind Ed Krick and Willard and the others that he and Slim Rothmeyer were in the room, almost behind them. Krick took a quick look over his shoulder. Willard looked, too. Willard's face was gray and perspiration showed on his upper lip.

"Come along, Krick," Manning ordered. He stepped forward purposefully as he spoke.

Krick gave a hoarse cry. He went for his gun but Manning knocked it aside and caught him under the jaw with a solid blow. Krick reeled sideways against Bill

Potter who was clawing under his arm. Manning slammed against Potter, staggering Potter against the table, knocking it over and carrying two other men to the floor with it.

Willard's gun was out now. He threw a shot at Manning but hurried it too much. Manning whipped up his own gun and put a slug in Willard's throat. With a bubbling, choked-off scream, Willard twisted half around and then fell to the floor.

Dan Olson had been covering the men at the bar. When none of them showed any desire to mix in what was happening, Dan put his gun away. Manning's gun was trained on Potter and Krick and those who had been in the poker game. All the fight was out of Krick. He was sitting up, holding his jaw, a dazed expression on his face.

"I want Krick and Potter, too, I reckon," Manning was saying, and there was an edge to his voice. "The rest of you blow."

"I reckon that means, us, too," Dan said to Rothmeyer.

He was grinning. He felt pretty good. He had a notion he wasn't going to have to worry any more about the man who had taken his job.

"I—I just can't believe it," Rothmeyer gasped.

Dan walked over to where Manning was standing. He put an arm around Manning's shoulder. He said, "Nice work, sheriff."

Joe Manning blinked. "Dan, I wish—"

Dan didn't know what Manning meant to say. He didn't care much. "Sorry, Joe," he broke in. "I've got to ride. When you head for Mesquite take the road across the mesa if you've got time. I want to show you what good sheriffs get to retire to."

"Watch for me, Dan," Manning answered.

Dan Olson headed for the door. "Weed made a good choice in sheriffs," he said to no one in particular. "If anyone starts rustlin' my cows I know where to come for help."

But he really wasn't worried about anything like that. He had a notion that after tonight's work, things around Weed were going to be kept pretty much in order.

Trail Back From Boothill

By RALPH YERGEN



"I'm the Goat Man!" gitted the derelict.

The lovely vision of a bronze-haired girl drove Joe Starkwood down a kill-crazy trail to a bittersweet vengeance that even he—a hate-warped husk of what was once a man—couldn't take!

THUNDER VALLEY folk thought Joe Starkwood was crazy. Like a wandering nomad in Biblical times, he'd drifted in from the north with his flock of goats. He'd roamed Thunder Valley all summer, keeping to himself, disturbing no one, ranging his goats on free grass.

People laughed at this mysterious Goat Man. But they would not have laughed if they could have read the thoughts running through his mind this lazy autumn afternoon as the three riders evolved out of the shimmering heat waves.

Joe Starkwood recognized each of the three outlaws, and a brittle flame of hate flared in his slate-colored eyes. He had

sided that trio for three months, before they ganged up and shot him almost to boothill.

He was acutely aware of the sleek touch of gun steel against his lean belly where he kept his Colt .45 concealed beneath his shirt. A powerful impulse tided up in him to drag that gun and square accounts in a hot storm of powdersmoke, but he throttled it with a stony will. If they did not recognize him, those three treacherous killers could deal the winning cards right into his hands.

Butch Magrone headed the group, his burly body tilted forward in the saddle like a beer keg. His rat-like eyes speared at the goat herd, and deep contempt

slanted his cruel lips beneath the sooty mustache. Beside Magrone, the sleek, pantherish Handsome Gomez filled a silver-mounted hull, his white teeth gleaming in a perpetual snarl. The third man, Spider Hogan, appeared in continual torment. His hands kept making fast, jerky motions above his thronged holsters as if stabbing pistol points at imaginary enemies.

The three skidded their mounts to a dusty halt in front of Joe Starkwood, no sign of recognition in their contemptuous stares. Butch Magrone planted his boots heavily in the cropped grama grass. He looked at the grazing goats and at Joe Starkwood.

"Who told you to stink up the country with them damn chin-whiskered varmints, hombre?" he rasped hoarsely.

Joe guarded the bitter anger bristling inside him. He forced a whine to his voice made forever wheezy by a bullet through his throat. "Leave me be, you gents. I ain't hurtin' nobody. And this here is free grass."

Magrone spat a cud of tobacco that splattered Joe's boots. "Ain't seen any riders around today, have you?" He tapped his barrel chest. "The kind with the brass star."

Joe shook his head, forcing a vacant look into his eyes. "Ain't seen nothin'," he muttered. "Nothin' but spiruts. Lotsa spiruts, especially come night time."

Suspicion twisted across Magrone's face.

Handsome Gomez snorted. "Come on, Butch. I told you the old coot was cracked wider'n the Rio. Thinks he sees spooks."

The burly leader took a threatening step toward Joe. "You sure you ain't seen nobody around here today, hombre?"

Joe cringed back, avoiding Magrone's direct stare. "Nothin' but spiruts," he babbled crazily.

Their attitude told him positively that they did not recognize him. It was no puzzle; for the change in his appearance was almost unbelievable. When they had known him, he had been a strapping big fellow with coal-black hair and ruddy skin. But that bullet storm and boothill's lingering shadow had whittled down his frame to a withered gauntness so that his patched rags hung on him like gunny

sacks on a scarecrow. His frowzy hair was now snowdrift white, his complexion bleak and colorless, and bullet scars had twisted his face into an ugly, misshapen mass.

He cowered away from Butch Magrone, feeling the pressure of the gun barrel inside his shirt and wanting to seize the weapon and blast the heart out of the big man. Again he controlled the impulse. He could afford to grovel before them, to bide his time a few hours longer. For if the cards fell right, he could ride out of Thunder Valley tonight a rich man instead of a miserable goatherd.

"Leave me be," he quavered. "I ain't hurtin' you, and I ain't seen no riders—leastwise no livin' ones."

"Let's move, Butch," Spider Hogan said jerkily. "No use chinnin' with a loon like him. He wouldn't know a sheriff from a shot of red-eye."

Butch Magrone reached out, his fingers closing like a vise on Joe's bony shoulder and shaking him until his neck popped.

"Listen here, hombre," he snarled. "You say you ain't seen nobody? Just keep on sayin' that. Savvy? You ain't seen us, neither. If anybody ever asks you, remember we was just spiruts like you see in the night. If you ever tell anybody different, we'll come back and beat your carcass until your liver falls out of your ugly mug. Get that straight!"

He hurled Joe away from him like a sack of sawdust. Joe's feet tangled and he flopped down in the dust and lay there cringing.

Laughter gargled from Spider Hogan and Handsome Gomez. Butch Magrone planted his weight solidly in the saddle and, without a backward look, led his cohorts over a grass-gowned swell toward the rimrock of Bowie Knife Canyon.

Joe Starkwood propped himself on one elbow and watched them vanish over the crest, the hate in his eyes an unguarded swirl of crimson sparks.



CREEPING purple shadows were beginning to sober the color-splashed prairie when Joe Starkwood forked his granite gray mustang, a smooth giant of a horse.

As he lined over the rangeland toward Bowie Knife Canyon, he shrugged away a glimmer of doubt. Nothing had ever yet gone right for Joe Starkwood. But tonight would be different. He had spent a year building up to this hour.

From the shadows of the stage line livery at Gold Hill, he'd learned that the stage from Malagua today was hauling fifteen thousand dollars cash for the Gold Hill mines.

Joe was certain that the Magrone gang would strike for that strongbox. For a month they'd been hanging around their canyon hideout, unbeknownst to anyone but Joe Starkwood who had spotted them in his secretive wanderings by night.

Once the cash rested in the outlaws' hands, it would be easy. They'd have to sleep sometime. First he'd pick off the guard. As the others awakened, his dynamic gun-skill would drop them in the same pool of blood.

Down in the hills of Chihuahua a man could keep a Mex servant and drink the finest tequila for the rest of his life on fifteen thousand American dollars.

Some of the bitterness faded from Joe Starkwood's eyes as he let them rove past the sunset-crimsoned buttes to the misty blue skyline. It was then that he saw the boy and girl, far across the canyon, riding side by side.

The boy, a lithe, sun-burned youth in his early twenties. The girl, slim and shapely, her golden hair radiant and flowing.

They reminded Joe that he hadn't always been an outlaw. Once he, too, had taken those long evening rides across the high range with a bronze-haired girl. He'd built his dreams into a fine little spread so there'd be a place for Sharon Lynn when he married her.

But things happened that Joe Starkwood hadn't foreseen. Drouth, disease and prairie fire swept away his ranch. A dark-eyed stranger named Ben Hayes, with a bulging bankroll and a smooth line of gab, caught and held Sharon's powder-blue eyes. In a month, Ben Hayes and Sharon Lynn were married.

Right before his eyes, Joe Starkwood's once promising future had dried up and blown away. Like many a man in similar circumstances, he had tried to swamp his

bitterness in whiskey. But it only dulled his sense of right and wrong. He ran into Butch Magrone and his bowers. He got it into his liquor-drugged head that they were his friends.

When Joe Starkwood sobered up, he was dodging a posse's bullets. Right behind him, Butch toted a bundle of swag from a mine payroll wagon. Later, Butch figured they might as well split their loot three ways, instead of four.

They ganged Joe Starkwood as he rode into camp one night. They shot him to sausage and rolled him over a bluff. The plunge would have finished what little life remained in Joe if he hadn't landed in a puddle of soft, gooey mud beside a spring. Come morning, a sheepherder found him and nursed him. . . .

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AS THE crimson slice of sun faded from view, Joe Starkwood began the steep descent, zigzagging along the ledges. At the canyon floor, he left his horse in a chaparral thicket.

Clinging to every available bit of cover, Joe followed the tracks of three horses along the rocky stage road. He soon found the outlaws' horses, tied among the chaparral. Shortly beyond, the canyon hooked sharply. That would be the holdup spot.

He circled, coming out on a flat shelf some hundred feet above the rutty road, not far from the canyon's crook. He couldn't see the outlaws but he knew they were there.

It wasn't long until the creak and groan of bouncing wood slithered up the canyon. Joe Starkwood heard the crack of the skinner's writhing blacksnake, an impatient curse. The old yellow Concord swayed around the bend and came rolling on into the death trap.

"Cut 'er lose!" Joe recognized Butch Magrone's throaty bellow.

Powder flame streaked from the shadows. Like broken leaves withering under a scorching sun, the driver and guard toppled head foremost to the ground.

The big Hamilton mares snorted and rared back. Butch darted out of the mesquite bushes, his brawny hand snaking for the bridles of the nearest lead horse.

"You, inside the crate! Roll out of

there, or we'll sprinkle you with lead."

Passengers, Joe knew, would take the same lead medicine. Butch Magrone never took a chance on somebody's descriptive eye. Butch reasoned that if they were all dead, the sheriff could only guess.

Handsome Gomez and Spider Hogan crawled from behind the rocks on the side where Joe lay flattened.

Joe saw the squeaky door yawn open. Something like a lightning shock jolted him to the core. He stared in amazement.

A slender woman in a dark-blue coat stepped from the coach. A blue bonnet tried to crowd back rebellious bronze curls. Her eyes glowed large in the fading light, and Joe knew they were powdery and blue-gray.

His lips framed the word involuntarily: "Sharon."

Right behind, a worried frown creasing his face, a darkly handsome man in a gray business suit emerged, his hand on Sharon's elbow drawing her back. Ben Hayes was a mining engineer, Joe recalled. They must be headed for one of the diggings back of Gold Hill.

The sight of them together fanned the blackened cinders of his hate to a red flame. A rich exultation rippled over him.

Things were working far smoother than he could have hoped. He wouldn't need to turn a hand to see the pair that had ruined his life crumble in the dust.

Butch Magrone said, "The hosses, Handsome. Git 'em, quick."

Gomez set out at a trot.

Magrone clumped around to the near side and stood with his ape-like hands on his muscle-knotted thighs. A devil's mixture of contempt and glee marked his unblinking stare. Butch enjoyed seeing people die. A killing to him was like a drink of whiskey—satisfying by always making you thirsty for more.

"Ready, boss," Spider Hogan said.

"Bowl 'em over," Butch grunted.

Spider Hogan's hammers cared back. Sharon's scream quivered the air. It died away to a tremulous sob. Ben Hayes was pushing forward, fists clamped, jaw muscles taut, his distorted eyes pleading as the full import struck home. His voice cracked hoarsely: "Shoot me if you want to. But in mercy's name, let my wife live!"

Butch Magrone's rat-like eyes glittered. "Shore, if it'll make you feel better."

Sharon's strained face was a white mask. Her bloodless lips were trembling.

Sweat glistened on Ben Hayes' forehead. "All right," he said huskily. "It's a promise. And a deal."

MAYBE Butch had fooled Ben Hayes, but he didn't fool Joe Starkwood. He'd simply kill them one at a time.

Butch's voice rang out: "Wake up, Spider. Plug him!"

Spider Hogan's gun flickered. It bucked in his hand with the spurt of smoke and flame.

A flash of blue streaked across Joe Starkwood's vision. Sharon had flung herself in front of Ben Hayes—taking the bullet meant for her husband. Joe saw her shoulder jerk.

Ben Hayes was hurling his left arm about her, sweeping her around behind him. His right hand dipped into his coat pocket. It came out clutching a snub-nosed .32 revolver.

Hayes hadn't used it before because it would have only invited death for them both. Now he, too, knew they were both doomed anyhow, and he was going down fighting.

Spider's second slug bounced off Ben Hayes' ribs. But the mining man didn't flinch. The .32 spat in his hand. Joe saw Spider Hogan wince as that small slug slapped his shoulder. The shock of it seemed to numb his gun hands for an instant.

Sharon dived behind the big stage coach. Butch Magrone sprang forward, gun blazing. Hayes went down, but he got up again and crawled behind the coach. From there, Hayes poured lead at the cursing outlaws, chasing them behind the rocks.

Joe could hear Handsome Gomez thundering up on a horse. Butch Magrone bel-lowed: "Watch out, Handsome! They got a hawglaig. Get around t'other side and mow 'em down."

Handsome yelled back assent. Joe heard him threshing up the opposite slope. He knew Ben and Sharon's goose was cooked once Handsome got behind them.

He couldn't seem to shake from his mind

the vivid sight of Sharon flashing forward to take the bullet that was tagging the man she loved. Somehow, it was opening up a new channel in his mind.

This pure, unselfish devotion they both displayed tonight was something new and foreign to him. Neither gave a damn about his or her self. Each one's whole concern was for the other.

Joe Starkwood began to understand. And he also began to wonder why he'd done the things he had—and why he was doing nothing now. The knowledge was arrowing into his mind that the gold he'd get by watching this courageous pair die would be like blighted fruit. And that his long-planned life of luxury and ease would be scarred and bleached by the memory of what he had seen this night.

Over among the scattered sage tufts on the opposite slope, Handsome's gun began to snarl. Joe heard the spat of lead on flesh and sensed rather than heard the gasp of pain. Sudden alarm swelled within him. It might be too late.

With a tight feeling in his throat, he swung over the rock lip and slid down the bluff in a cloud of dust.

Butch Magrone and Spider Hogan whirled, faces blackening like thunder clouds.

"Yes, you know me, damn you!" Joe gritted. "I'm the Goat Man. And I'm Joe Starkwood, too. I'm back from purgatory to stuff your buzzard bellies with lead." His big .45 arced and boomed.

Spider Hogan jackknifed in mid-air and flopped like a rag over a humped boulder, dead before his motion ceased.

The lash of stinging pain belted Joe's range-hardened side. Reeling backward, he saw Butch Magrone grinning through the swirling gray smoke as the big killer aimed for a second shot.

Joe thought his gun was wavering in his hand, but it cracked twice like the stroke of pistons. Two jagged blotches sprang to Butch's greasy vest like the spots on the deuce of spades. His breath bubbled a curse as he pitched headlong.

Dizzily, Joe Starkwood climbed to his feet. Handsome was still popping away.

When Butch and Spider had whirled to face Joe, Sharon and Hayes had crawled around the coach away from Handsome's fire. Caked with blood, they

clung there. Hayes couldn't hold up the gun any longer. Sharon snatched it up, eyes searching desperately for a shot.

Without another glance at them, Joe wobbled down to the coach and climbed up to where he could peer over the driver's seat. He saw the brush wiggle up there fifty yards away. Then smoke puffed from the spot. Joe lined his sights and dropped the hammer.

Through the curling smoke ribbon, he saw Handsome Gomez roll out of the bush. He twitched twice and lay quiet. Joe's face muscles tightened with grim satisfaction. He'd seen too many men die to mistake that convulsive movement.

He leaned against the big, iron-banded wheel and looked down at Ben Hayes' unconscious face. Sharon was hovering over Ben, white-faced, eyes dilated in the growing darkness.

"He's alive," Joe said, conviction in his tones.

The woman nodded. "He'll live," she said fiercely. "He'll live. And we've you to thank for it."

She was on her feet in a flash, looking up at him. It was not strange that she failed to recognize him in the failing light.

Huskins touched her low tones. "I don't know who you are or where you came from, but—"

"I'm the Goat Man," Joe Starkwood said abruptly. "An outlaw."

She went on, a little throb in her voice: "Outlaw or not, there's something in your heart—I'll never forget."

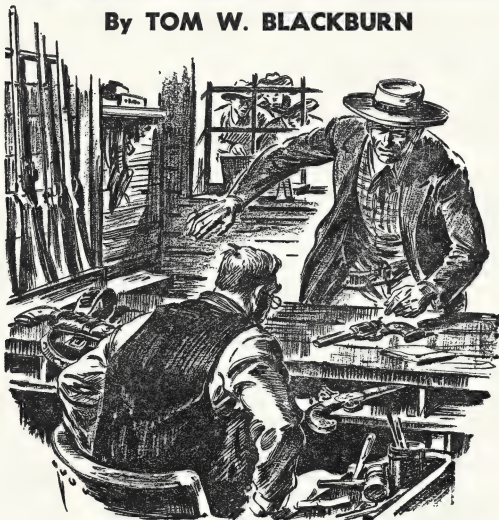
In an impulsive movement she came upon her toes and pressed her lips against his, lightly.

As Joe Starkwood turned to round up the horses, his eyes wandered to the strongbox that bulked on the high seat. His breath went out in a gusty sigh. That bullet in his side was giving him hell. Not a chance to make the border.

Later, from the high rimrock he watched the lighted coach crawl along toward Gold Hill, carrying the bullet-battered Hayes inside and Sharon on the driver's seat. Bitterness had strangely faded and with it all regret as he lifted his gaze to the south. Mexico's blue hills were only a distant blur in the hazy twilight. The first winking stars seemed much closer. . . .

POWDERSMOKE MAGIC

By TOM W. BLACKBURN



"Want to look at my iron?" he asked quietly.



With only his gunsmith shop left of the three things that had warmed his declining years, Old Dutch had to bring honor to one murdered friend—and freedom to another friend who had been jailed for the cowardly slaying.



THEY brought Tom Jarrett into Heff's shop. If some of them had stopped to think, they wouldn't have done this. Men liked old Dutch Hefflinger. None of them would have hurt him purposefully. It was just that Granite was not used to a dying man riding a lathered horse up its single street. Heff's door was closest to the hitch rail where Jarrett fell from his mount. So they brought him into the gunsmith's shop.

Heff stood in a corner, peering dazedly over the tops of his thick-lensed, silver-

rimmed glasses while Doc Crabtree, hurriedly summoned, bent over the injured man. It was hard for Heff to believe that Tom Jarrett was dying. Tom was a good man and a good friend. Heff knew. Tom had been his friend through a long string of years.

When Doc Crabtree straightened with the hopelessness of finality, Heff took off his glasses. In twenty years no man had seen him night or day without those dusty lenses bridging his nose, low down. Yet none of them noticed, now. A neighbor had died in front of them. A neighbor who had been shot in the back.

They started to file out.

Old Heff touched Doc Crabtree's arm. "What happened?"

Doc shook his head briefly. "I don't know, Heff. He just sloped in here, flopping in the saddle, and keeled over out in front. A thirty-thirty slug hit him between his shoulder blades. That's all I know. I've got to see Sheriff Bailey."

Doc went out, sharp concern in the deep creases of his face. The rest of the crowd followed, three of them lifting Tom Jarrett's body and lugging it on up the street to Doc's office and parlors.

Heff waited until they were gone. Then he crossed to the door with heavy steps, closed it, and turned back to his worn leather chair behind his bench. Dutch Hefflinger was an old man. His memory spanned half a continent and the ocean beyond it. He was a very old man, when he came to think of it. And the death of a friend as close as Tom Jarrett made a man think thoughts like that. He was an old man who had been busy at his trade a great many years. *Hefflinger, Gunsmith.*

Tom Jarrett was dead! Heff turned his eyes from the stain on his worn floor, the thought hammering monotonously: *Murdered!* Heff had long owned three things in Granite—and with them, he had been satisfied with life. Tom Jarrett's friendship; the friendship of young Earnie Smith; his trade as a smith. Now one of these things was gone. And he felt the loss keenly. This would be an empty room now, come winter and the stove was hot in the corner. A man couldn't play cribbage with himself! Heff put on his glasses, his brow wrinkling with thought.

He sat a long time, staring at his lit-

tered work bench and the rack of guns waiting call. Guns of three counties, come to him for repair. And as he sat, his mind worked steadily. In mid-afternoon, he came to an end of thinking. A man owed friends, living or dead, a debt. Tom Jarrett was gone, but the debt could be paid. Closing the door of his shop, he went up the street, turning in at Doc Crabtree's. The Doc had already finished his work and had pulled his shiny, cuff-worn alpaca coat on again.

"Don't fret, Heff," Doc said kindly as Heff sank into a chair. "Every man has his time. Nobody knows that better'n me. Tom lived his out in good measure. Folks'll miss him. None of us can want more than that when we're gone."

Heff swung his round, white-frizzed head stubbornly. "Tom was murdered!"

Doc Crabtree nodded. "By a back-shooting skunk. But I wouldn't give a plugged nickel for the hide of the jigger that shot him, either. Sheriff Bailey's been in the hills with a posse since noon!"

"He know who did it?"

Doc shook his head. "But he'll find out. Bailey's a bloodhound when it comes to smelling out coyotes."

Heff stared down at his gnarled hands, watching the play of cords through the blue-veined, transparent skin. "I want the bullet which killed my friend," he said slowly.

Doc shot a quick look at him, then dragged open a drawer of his desk and passed a misshapen lead slug across. Heff took it in his hands and rolled it between his fingers. He nodded. Doc had been wrong. It had not been a .30-30. It had been a hand gun. And a gunsmith who has served a county for years learns a lot about hand guns. He smiled a little to himself. He learns a lot about men, too. He was, he thought, going to be able to pay his debt to Tom Jarrett. He stood up, said good-by to Doc and went out onto the street again.

Somebody dropped in at supper time to tell him that Sheriff Bailey was hunting Earnie Smith for the killing of Tom Jarrett. And that news was a second blow, for it further crumpled the world with which Heff had been so long satisfied. Not that he believed Bailey was right. But he knew Bailey was a stubborn man. And

before some proof might come up that he had tagged the wrong man for the murder, Earnie Smith might be dead at the hands of the law.



NEAR nine o'clock, a sharp, quick knock sounded at the rear door of the shop. Heff heaved himself out of his chair and pulled the portal cautiously open. A youngish man crouched under the eaves, the moonlight glinting from the distended whites of his eyes. A guttural oath surged up in Heff's throat. "Fool!" he growled. "Young fool!" But he swung the door wider and hauled Earnie Smith swiftly out of the revealing light.

"Sure," Earnie muttered. "Sure I'm a fool, Heff. I'm crazy, too. Crazy as Bailey and this whole town! But I've got to talk to somebody, Heff, somebody who will listen to me! I didn't kill Tom Jarrett!"

Heff tipped his head. "No?"

Color flashed in Earnie's eyes. His muscles tightened, then relaxed as he caught Heff's friendly smile.

"This morning," Earnie began rapidly, "me and Tom was riding the fence which marks our line, patching breaks as we went. Him one break and me the next. We got out to the end of the line and was killing time there. I was expectin' Lucy Wainright to come along on her regular morning ride. Scoutin' around while we waited, me and Tom come on one of Tom's cows with a neat burn-over to Sid Pexton's Reversed C. Took Tom's J and burned another loop at the top of it to make it. We threw the critter to make certain. And when there wasn't any doubt, Tom blew up.

"Said he'd been crowded far enough by that big-fisted, gun-hung son of a range hog. Swore he'd ride to town, haul Pexton out'n the Lampwick and brain him with his own batwings! I was trying to talk sense into him when Lucy showed up—riding with Pexton himself! That riled me. But Tom was really smoking. He clawed air. Be-damned to Lucy, school-teacher or no, he was going to dish Pexton his needings, proper. And he dove for his saddle gun.

"I tell you, Heff, if I thought Tom had

a chance, I'd never have touched him. I was that sore at Pexton, myself. But Sid had his fist on his gun and Tom didn't have a leg to stand on, so I throwed him. Pexton and Lucy sat on the ridge top for a minute. But by the time I got Tom cooled some, they'd dropped down the far side again.

"I should have trailed them and split Lucy off from that oily Pexton and told her how it was with Tom and me—that we wasn't fightin'. But I was sore at seein' her with Pexton and I rode straight for home, leaving Tom at the end of the fence. I curried my horse down, mended a broken stirrup, and set twenty new poles in my corral by noon. I was just washin' up to eat when a herder off the rock end of my place sloped in with word that Sheriff Bailey was out in the hills after Tom Jarrett's murderer—and that Pexton and Lucy had said it was me.

"I thought he was stringing me. Tom was very much alive when I wrassled him out there at the fence. And Lucy saying I was a killer! It didn't make sense till I seen the posse comin'. I got clear, hid out, and come down here soon's it was dark enough. I don't aim to trouble you none, Heff, but I'm in a hell of a hole!"

Earnie's story went into Heff's ears like grain into a mill. The steady machinery of his mind ground at it, sorting the pieces to their proper place, reducing the whole thing to something he could understand. He rocked his head.

"Yah!" he agreed slowly. "A plenty deep hole—" He broke off suddenly as impatient hands rattled the latch on Heff's street door. A sudden sweat glinted on Earnie Smith's forehead. He ceased, in that moment, to be a troubled youngster caught in a net he couldn't understand. He turned animal in a breath, a savage animal cornered by a foe it fears. A gun came into his hands with swift and frantic magic, and he twisted into a crouch behind the work bench.

Dutch Hefflinger, stiff with rheumatism and the slowness of age, suddenly erupted from his chair like an old cat. He caught the boy's shoulder with a strong, stubby fingered old hand, and there was cold steel in the quiet drone of his voice.

"Give to me that gun!"

Earnie wavered for a moment. But there was faith in him. Heff was his friend. He slowly released the weapon. Heff shoved it under his coat. Then he crossed and tripped the latch of the door. The sheriff and half a dozen others poured past him into the room, roughly dragging young Smith to his feet. The cold iron snap of closing cuffs sounded in the room. Bailey turned to the old smith.

"Thanks, Heff."

"Yeah," Earnie Smith's bitter voice echoed, "thanks for nothing, Heff! Tom and me swore a dozen times you was the best friend a man could have. I'm glad he didn't live to see you turn me in."

The rasp of Earnie's disillusioned hatred crackled in the room like the snap of a plaited lash. It cut deeply at something in the middle of Dutch Hefflinger's squat, round-bellied figure. It was hard to lose two friends in one day. He looked owlishly over the silver rims of his glasses and made no answer to Earnie's charge. It was a hard thing to be arrested for the killing of a man who had been a friend. But it was not as hard as being hung for that killing. And Earnie Smith was a long ways from the gallows. Heff took comfort in that thought.



ED DAWSON came down from the bank early the next morning, a dog-eared envelope in his hands. "Jarrett gave me this three-four years ago, Heff," the banker said. "Told me to give it to you if he went first. It's a letter. Says he wants you to clean up his affairs and send what's left to a brother in Texas."

Heff took the time-creased sheet from within the envelope and read it slowly through.

Dawson waited with patience until he was finished, then the banker leaned for-

ward. "Reckon you know that small spreads in these times ain't exactly gold mines, Heff," he said apologetically. "Matter of fact, I only know of two possible buyers for Tom's place, cluttered up like it is with a note to Pexton at the Lampwick. Pexton himself might want it, seeing as the place borders him on one side. And Earnie Smith might want it from the other. But since last night I guess Earnie ain't in any shape to deal!"

Heff shook his head.

Dawson looked out the window.

"Reckon I'll see Pexton."

The mill in Heff's head ground slowly. "Maybe so. It was good you come down, Dawson. Thanks."

The banker looked curiously at the graven immobility of the old smith's face and shook his head perplexedly. "Sure. Well, if I can give you a lift with Tom's business, let me know." He went out.

It was not much later that Lucy Wainright came into Heff's shop. Lucy was not a beautiful woman. But the charm of her own childhood had never left her, its sheen glossing over the squareness of her features and the straightness of her gleaming hair so that even in old Heff there was pleasure when she was near. But the gloss was gone from her this morning. Deep trouble and a terrible hurt were in her eyes. Her face was white and strained and her lips colorless.

"Heff!" she said earnestly. "Heff—I need help!"

"Yah!" the old smith nodded. "Earnie!"

"Yes! Earnie!" the girl answered with a rush. "What's wrong with me—with the whole town—with Earnie?"

Heff put his hand out to the girl's arm. "You tell me something, Miss Lucy. Sid Pexton is—your friend?"

The girl colored. "Sid Pexton! No! I'm afraid you and I both like the same kind of men, Heff."

Tom W. Blackburn, author of this fine story, will be back next month with another of his Long John Poker yarns of the Southwest. Can you imagine tough, gun-swift Juan Poker turning sawbones? Well, it happens in March 10 STORY WESTERN. You can read it Feb. 11th!

"But you were riding with him, eh?" asked the old smith.

"I was riding alone. Out near the fence between Tom Jarrett's place and Earnie's. Pexton came out of a draw and rode beside me. I had a feeling he had been waiting for me to come along. He suggested we ride up the fence. Then we saw Earnie and Tom—fighting!"

"So you come back to the town and tell Sheriff Bailey that Earnie killed his neighbor?"

The girl shook her head violently. "That's just it. I didn't! After we rode away from the fence Sid Pexton left me and I came straight back to town, thinking Earnie would follow me in. But he didn't. A little later Tom Jarrett came in—dying! And after that Sid Pexton showed up and told the sheriff how he'd seen Tom and Earnie fighting—while I was with him. I didn't say anything. It was so sudden and so terrible to think about. Heff, Earnie couldn't have killed Tom! They were friends. It's all wrong. Earnie's in jail. You've got to do something!"

The old smith made no answer. The girl stood a moment longer, then she spun with a sob and flung blindly out of the office. Outside she seemed to pull herself together a little and went on up the street toward the schoolhouse and the youngsters waiting for her.

Heff rubbed his jaw a little. It was not good to see a woman hurt like that. When a woman loved a man, she shouldn't be hurt. But it was better that Lucy Wainright know her terror now instead having to face the greater one later of watching her man hanged in front of the court-house. The mill of Heff's mind was still running, and until it was finished he wanted no one to now that he thought at all. It was best this way.

When the girl was gone from sight, Heff took Earnie Smith's gun from a drawer. He fished a battered leaden globule from his pocket and placed it beside the gun on his bench. He looked at both a long time and carefully. Then he put both away, smiling a little.

At noontime Heff again closed his shop and went up the street. Dawson, at the bank, seemed surprised to see him.

"Pexton was asking about Jarrett's place," the banker said. "I told him you

were handling it, but that he'd better wait a day or two before he saw you about it. I figured you wouldn't feel like business at least till Tom was buried. But you've sold already, eh?"

"Yah!" Heff said flatly.

Dawson opened the wicket and put his hand on the old smith's arm. "Don't seem hardly right, one way, Tom's place going to a man whose guts he hated. But business is like that! Pexton can lay the green on the line and you should have got a good price for that brother in Texas. Pexton was anxious."

Heff grunted impatiently. Bankers talked too much about business which was none of their affair.

"I buy the place! Settle with Pexton's note from my account and send to the brother in Texas five t'ousand dollars. Give to me the deed tomorrow."

Ed Dawson bit violently through his cigar, spat out the rags of filler, and leaned forward heavily with both hands on his counter. "Five thousand!" he breathed at Heff's departing back. "Five thousand for a two-by-four. I'm damned!"



IN MID-AFTERNOON Heff's mind stopped grinding and his plan was finished. He rose from the deep chair in which he had sat motionless for an hour and moved to his window. A plush case lay on a display board there. Within the case, a work of beauty and craftsmanship which could have come only from the old world, was the finest gun Heff's hands had ever touched. It was an old duelling-pistol which had been a part of his youth and which he had brought from Rotterdam. Beneath the case which held it, lettered in quaint old script, was a simple card:

*This gun once belonged to a famous
duelling-master*

Heff carefully removed the case and the card from the window. He looked at the lettering. Rotterdam and the fame which had belonged to him when this gun was new were both a long ways distant in both time and miles. But the gun rested easily in his hand, still. He smiled and put the

case under the counter. Wetting a pen, he laboriously lettered another display card.

In a few moments passers-by on the walk outside were pausing at his window to stare in at a battered leaden pellet above a card which bore another terse legend.

This bullet killed a man. It came from a gun re-built in this shop!

Windows seldom changed in Granite and word got around in the idleness of the afternoon so that there was always a man or two standing before the glass, staring at something they did not understand. And afterward, some of them drifted across the street to Sid Pexton's Lampwick for a drink and to talk over what crazy notion had hit Heff to change his display.

These things satisfied Heff. He watched through the long day, paying little attention to the faces beyond the window, waiting for one in particular. In midafternoon Lucy Wainright, her troubled eyes barely able to hold back the tears behind them, came into the shop again. Heff nodded pleasantly to her.

"Heff, you're the only one left!" she cried out. "You've got to do something! I've seen the sheriff and Judge Gowan, and even Sid Pexton. None of them will listen to me. I think they want to see Earnie hanged!"

Heff spread his hands down in front of him. "I t'ink maybe somebody wants to see him hanged," he agreed thoughtfully. "But I tell you, what, Miss Lucy. It isn't good a girl should run around the street in the sun. No! You go home now. You rest. Pretty soon now, maybe I want you. Eh?"

The girl looked up angrily, caught something reassuring in the old smith's eyes, and turned wearily out the door. Heff smiled again when she left, and lifting the old gun from its plush case, he opened a cupboard, found what he wanted in the litter there, and charged the gleaming barrel with powder and ball.

Twenty minutes ahead of sundown, Sid Pexton crossed the street from the Lampwick. He paused at the window as though to verify something about which he had heard much through the afternoon. Then

he came grimly on into the shop and closed the door tightly behind him.

"Dawson says you bought Jarrett's place up without giving me a chance!" he complained.

Heff nodded.

"Puts me back on my heels," Pexton went on. "I want that piece myself. You've got a square name in this town, Hefflinger. You're too damned old and rickety to want ground yourself. I never figured you'd use a dead friend's trust to skin another gent out of something he wanted. But if you haven't set your cut on Jarrett's place too high, maybe we can still make a deal."

"No!" Heff said quietly.

And he watched Pexton narrowly. There was no doubt in him, now. A hunch and a little more patience. That was all he needed. It couldn't have been plainer if Pexton had signed a sworn statement. The saloonman had doubled back out there on the grass after he left Lucy Wainright. Earnie Smith had already left Jarrett and was high-tailing angrily for his own place when Pexton topped the ridge again. Jarrett wasn't looking for him. It had been easy. A single shot in the back.

It didn't take long and Pexton was back in town in short minutes, ready to tell what Lucy Wainright and himself had seen out in the hills whenever Jarrett's death was discovered. After that the cards fell face up. Jarrett's land would be sold to settle his estate. Earnie Smith was in jail and in need of cash. Pexton could pick up the two ranches siding his own on quick buys and for clipped prices and Lucy Wainright would be left with but one suitor—except for the slow thinking and careful planning of an old man who wanted to pay a debt of friendship to a dead man.

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THE steady flame in Heff's eyes burned more coldly with the ticking seconds. Pexton's hawk face twisted nervously and he scowled. His eyes moved restlessly away from the smith's stare, coming unwillingly to the window and its changed display. He tipped his head toward it.

"Where'd you get that slug?"

"From Tom Jarrett's back!" Heff's face didn't change a line as he answered in a flat voice.

Pexton's gaze flickered again to the card which boasted identification of the pellet above it. His lips tightened about his teeth. Heff sat motionless, but the muscles of his arms were harder than they had been for years and his hand was curled close to the old pistol under the counter.

Slowly Pexton's gaze swung back to meet Heff's. The sheen of falseness which lies between men who keep their own secrets was suddenly gone. Pexton's hand went steadily downward, came up carefully with his gun. He laid the weapon on the counter before him, the muzzle pointing toward Heff.

"Want to look at my iron?" he asked so quietly that the words were almost soundless.

Heff's head rocked from side to side in a slow, deliberate refusal. "No. I know your gun."

For a torn second of time they stood there then, the young and the old, poised above two weapons on a pine counter and with the knowledge of the manner of another man's death in them both. When the screaming tension broke, it was the younger who moved with all the fear-born speed of a killer caught in his own net.

Double concussion rocked the little shop, the heavy slam of a muzzle-loaded gun far out-dinning the bitter, snapping bark of a faster weapon. After that, there was silence. . . .

When Sheriff Bailey kicked open the door of the shop, old Heff sat in a halo of gunsmoke, untouched and swabbing out the barrel of his old duelling gun. A mas-

ter does not lose his touch, even if half a lifetime has passed without a call for him to use his skill.

The sheriff stared down at the dead man on the floor for a long time. A fresh-stain was obliterating the one Tom Jarrett's blood had left on Heff's floor. Finally the sheriff raised his head, swinging his eyes from the dead man to the window and then back to the smiling old smith.

"Pexton!" he breathed. "Damn me, he was smarter than I was! He knew you'd matched that slug from Jarrett's body to the gun that fired it and knew who owned that gun!"

Heff's face was a quiet mask again, old and lined and pleased.

"The science of ballistics," he said. "But it was a trick. Without many fine tools for measuring, no man can tell which gun has fired a bullet! I make myself a trap with good bait. I catch myself a wolf. So!"

Sheriff Bailey pushed his head slowly back from his head so that the white skin showed at the roots of his thinning hair and a slow, sheepish grin started downward from his eyes.

"Hell!" he grunted in self-accusation. "I should have known something like this would break when you didn't lift a hand or make a sound the night I snapped the cuffs on Earnie Smith right in front of you!"

Heff was carefully placing his old gun in its plush case. He looked up. "Maybe it is a good thing you turn Earnie loose now, eh?" And he nodded his head toward the street where Lucy Wainright was running breathlessly toward the gunsmith shop.

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of 10 Story Western Magazine, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1943. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold R. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of 10 Story Western Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 305 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold R. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 305 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Harold R. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold R. Goldsmith, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 18, Register's No. 4W359, (My commission expires March 30, 1944.) [Seal]—Form 5639—Ed. 1933.

"To Hell With Barbwire!"

Punch-packed Action Novelette of the Untamed West

The rope snaked out—
jerked taut!



By MORGAN LEWIS



When Chuck Aldrich brought his farmer's ways from Pennsylvania to the great range country—and barbed wire to shield his crops from the hoofs of mighty Texas cattle drives—he didn't know he was bringing strife, hatred and blood-red nights to the land of his young cowboy brother.

CHAPTER ONE

Lawdog!

THE locomotive whistle gave a long blast of relief and the dusty coaches rolled and jerked to a stop before Meridian's barren station, the point farthest west to which the railroad had shoved its steel fingers.

Chuck Aldrich shrugged his train-stiffened shoulders and moved out into the sun's molten glitter. Under the black suit his torso and shoulders swelled up from flat, lean hips, big with a rawboned

heaviness of frame and muscle. He stood at the edge of the platform and watched the train disgorge its cargo of homesteaders.

They were a weary and untidy mass of humanity, women with children tugging at their skirts and holding younger ones in their tired arms. Men dressed in sober blacks and grays, the marks of farm life plainly evident in their heavy muscles and calloused hands.

Further along the rails were loading pens jammed with bawling cattle, dust boiling up under their milling feet. Strung out on the immensity of plain beyond the

town were other herds waiting their turns at the loading pens and further south a great pall of dust marked the course of yet another herd coming up from the south.

Meridian meant cattle and the men and ways of life that were a natural concomitant. Cattle had built the town and cattle held it together.

A man came up to the crowd and introduced himself as Andrew Bell, Meridian's real estate agent. He was lanky, sincere, with an eye to the future and under the spell of his talk pleasure and excitement kindled in the eyes of the homesteaders. He got them together and started for town, a livery rig loaded with their baggage following.

Chuck Aldrich stood on the edge of the platform, his lean face with its deeply hooded gray eyes scanning the approach to town. The crowd of homesteaders churned past him. At the tail end a stocky, middle-aged farmer stepepd up and took him by the arm:

"Comin' along into town?" he inquired.

Chuck took a last look and dropped into step beside Avery Smith and his stout wife, Martha. Lanna Smith moved easily beside her mother, her figure, tall and rounded, was saved from bigness by the firm strength of its proportions. Her hair, the deep color of ripe wheat, came just above Chuck's shoulder.

Before them Bison Street unrolled its broad length, carpeted with deep silver dust and boarded with false-fronted stores and business establishments, each with its own hitching rail.

Avery squinted at the flats stretching away from town.

"A mite different from Northern Pennsylvania where we have to use tackles on the teams to keep 'em from slidin' off the hills."

His glance fell to Chuck's big, hard hands. "None of my business, but I cal'late you're makin' a mistake not stickin' to farmin'—you got plenty heft and hands that was made for plow handles."

Chuck shook his head slowly. "Twenty-eight years on a farm is a-plenty. Now its time to see a little of the country and maybe do some ranchin'."

The plank walks gave back the steady tramp of feet as they approached the center of town, past Goldberg's Notion

Emporium, Canedy's General Store, The Harness Shop, Tucker's Cowboy Store.

They came to the four corners in the shade of the Cochran House and could look down Fleet Street with its gambling places and saloons interspersed with stores and bisected by alleys.

Avery wagged his graying head. "I dunno," he said doubtfully, "but this looks like a sinful town to me—look at all them drinkin' places."

Andrew Bell turned and said quickly, "They won't bother you. This is a shipping point for cattle and they cater to the trail crews."

"Mebbe so," Avery answered disapprovingly, "but I'd wipe out this street if I had the doin'."

It was mid-afternoon and a cowboy carrying a full load came weaving up Fleet Street. He hesitated at the end of the walk and then came on ploughing through the dust of an intersecting alley.

A tall man wearing a star and two low slung guns came from the shade of a building and drifted over to him. He spoke to the waddie and the man shook his head and tried to push past. The man with the star took him by the shirt front and slugged him in the face with unhurried, thudding blows. When he released his hold the waddie fell full length in the dust.

A gasp of protest went up from the women.

"That's Suydam Bliss, day marshal," Bell offered in extenuation. "That alley is the deadline and the cowboy knew better than to try to cross it."

But Chuck Aldrich only half heard the explanation; he was walking towards the marshal, his boots hitting the planks with a heavy, solid tread like the sound of fists.

Bliss turned at the sound and laid an indifferent but wary eye on him. He was a tall, feline appearing man with long, straight mustaches and hair combed down at the ears in frontiers-man style.

Chuck's flat-boned face was tight with anger and his heavy jaw was ridged. He came abreast of the marshal and his big fist shot out to smash heavily on the man's jaw.

Bliss went down, flat on his back. Chuck stepped back and waited for him to get up.

That was a mistake. The marshal came off the ground, low in a driving turn. His fist raked across Chuck's race and his right knee came up into the stomach.

Chuck doubled over, the marshal's gun barrel cracked down on his head—and there were two men in the dust.



CHUCK groaned and opened his eyes. Water was running down his face from a cloth that Martha Smith was holding on his head. Her stout, red face was bent solicitously over him and he was lying on a bed in a hotel room. Lanna sat quietly in a chair beside him. Her face was calm but one hand showed red where she had gripped it.

Avery Smith turned from the window and came over to the bed. "What in tarnation made you tackle that marshal, boy?" he twanged. "You didn't have no call to barge in jest account he hit a tipsy cowboy."

Chuck sat up and gingerly fingered the lump on his head. "That cowboy happened to be my brother," he said.

"Oh!" Avery said as though the words had stirred something in his mind. "So that's who you was lookin' for back on the platform."

Chuck nodded. "Bud wrote me that he was trailin' a bunch of cattle up from Texas and would meet me here. He's foreman for the Bar O ranch."

A faint crease appeared between Avery's grizzled brows. "I don't like to speak agin your brother," he said slowly, "but it looked like he was pretty drunk. I wouldn't like to see you dragged into his wild and sinful ways."

Chuck's wide mouth broke into a tolerant grin. "Bud was always wild—no harm in him but he can't stay put."

Knuckles rapped on the door and Bud Aldrich walked in. He was sober now but his face was bruised and lopsided from the marshal's fists. He came over to the bed and grinned crookedly at Chuck. "So he got you, too," he murmured. His eyes shifted to Lanna and held until Chuck introduced him. Bud was an inch or two shorter than Chuck and thin as a lath with whipcord muscles showing through his calico shirt.

Martha bobbed her red face to him as she was introduced and went out. Avery paused with his hand on the door. "Our room's right down the hall," he said. "If you want anything, sing out!" Lanna followed her father from the room.

Bud sat on the edge of the bed and dragged out the makings. "I could see you take a clout at Bliss," he said, "but I couldn't get up to help you." He sifted tobacco into the paper and rolled it expertly. "When you had him down you'd oughta jumped him with both feet—standin' back and givin' him a chance to come at you don't go with his kind."

Chuck rubbed his sore belly. "I learned that the hard way," he agreed briefly.

"If you'd been packin' a gun you'd be stiff and cold by now," Bud continued thoughtfully. "This Suydam Bliss is a killer—been marshal in more tough towns than you got fingers. When a town quiets down and won't stand his rough ways no more he moves on to another one."

Chuck got up and walked to the window. His was a corner room and he could look down Fleet Street where signs of activity were showing. Saloon men were opening the swinging doors and tying them back in preparation for the night's business. The tinkle of a piano floated up through the warm air and girls from the Paradise Dance Hall stood in doorways.

A group of horsemen turned into Fleet Street from an alley and swept its length, standing high in their stirrups and howling at the sky.

Bud came over to the window and stood with his hand on Chuck's shoulder. "Some of the outfit gettin' in early," he commented with a grin.

"Funny thing about cowpokes," he went on. "They hate trail towns like poison and cuss 'em from hell to breakfast but once they get in sight of one the devil himself couldn't hold 'em back." He slapped Chuck's shoulder. "Now that you're here come on out and we'll go down and meet the boys."

Chuck nodded and turned to the window that gave out on Bison Street. Across the flat roofs of the houses he could see the plain, brown and yellow under the slanting sun, stretching away limitlessly to the vast curve of the earth. And that flat plain was dotted with cattle, newly

arrived or on its way up from the south.

Beyond the end of Bison Street was the camp of the homesteaders, the canvas tops of wagons showing a dingy gray. Further out to the west shacks were going up where former arrivals had claimed their sections and started building.

Knuckles rapped the door and Avery Smith came in, his face faintly worried. "Don't like to bother you," he said, "but Billy ain't here yet. . . . Billy's my boy," he explained to Bud. "Sent him on ahead with two teams and a wagon." He turned to Chuck. "We want two sections of land side by side and I'm afraid somebody'll take the land next to mine afore he gits here. . . ." He hesitated. "If your business ain't pressin' I was wonderin' if you'd claim a quarter section and hold it for him."

Chuck glanced at Bud. "How long will you be here?"

"Three, four days," Bud said. "Maybe a week—depends how quick we get to use the loading pens."

"Think Billy will be here before we leave?" Chuck asked Avery.

"Cal'late he will," Smith answered. "Supposed to git here this week."

Lanna Smith passed the open door just then and Chuck's eyes shuttled to her and back to Avery. "Nothin' pressin' right now," he said. "I'll be glad to help you out."

Avery moved to the door. "Much obliged," he said. "We'll be startin' in the mornin'."

He went out and Chuck made a half turn to the bed. He pulled a money belt from under his shirt and laid it on the counterpane. "When Paw died I sold the farm, lock, stock and barrel—Here's your share." He passed a sheaf of greenbacks to his brother.

Bud riffled the bills and his eyes began to shine. "No more ram-roddin' other men's outfits," he said softly. "We'll hit for Texas and buy ourselves a herd and trail 'em up north to the railroad. A couple of good trips and we can really go to ranchin'. The way beef is in five years we'll have money enough to pitch chuck with gold forks."

Chuck grinned at his enthusiasm. "It's up to you," he said. "The only cows I know about are the kind you milk."

"Leave it to me," Bud grinned. He rolled the bills, snapped a pink armband around the roll and shoved it into his pocket.

CHAPTER TWO

Trouble's Shadow

THEY ate at the hotel dining room and Suydam Bliss came in and took a table at the far corner, with his back to the wall. Bud stared across the room with narrowed eyes. "Some day," he prophesied, "a hombre will come along and teach our friend there a few manners."

"Meanin' yourself?" Chuck inquired.

Bud shook his head. "It won't be me and it won't be you. I know when I'm out of my class—you can't give away twenty or thirty pounds to a man like Bliss and come out top dog. You've got the heft but you don't know the dirty tricks."

Bliss finished his meal and passed their table with his soft, cat-like tread. His tawny eyes flicked over them indifferently, paused and came back to them. He swung on his heel and took a step back to the table. "When you've finished your meal," he said, "get back on your own side of town and stay there."

The man's preemptory tone as well as the words started a slow anger in Chuck. He could feel the blood pulsing through the bruise on his head left by the marshal's gun.

"This is my side of town," he said evenly.

The marshal stared hard at him. "You're with him?" He gestured at the tight lipped Bud.

Chuck nodded.

"Then you belong on Fleet Street. Don't make me tell you again!"

Chuck spread his hands, palms down, on the table before him. "This is a free country, friend," he said deliberately. "No man is so big he can tell me where to go or where to stay!"

The marshal's expression didn't change but a light flickered far back in his eyes. His arms were hanging loosely at his sides. He pivoted on his left foot with feline speed and slashed a long driving swing across the table.

Chuck swayed to the left and as the marshal's fist grazed his jaw, brought his hands off the table to grasp the wrist and pull. Thrown off balance by the force of his swing, Bliss's thighs hit the table and he came down flat across it.

Chuck whipped an arm about his neck and bore down while he jerked the guns from their holsters and tossed them to Bud. He heaved, and marshal and table went to the floor in a crash of breaking crockery.

Chairs scraped as diners arose hurriedly and started to crowd in. Bud jumped to his feet waving the two black guns.

"Keep off!" he yelled and the rush stopped and sucked back.

Bliss put his feet against the table and sent it skittering over the floor. He came up like a raging tiger, humiliation driving him far beyond the bounds of caution. But this time Chuck wasn't there when the marshal's knee came up; he stepped to one side and sledged Bliss to the face, left and right, the smack of the blows sounding sharply through the room.

Blass staggered and came in close where his barroom tactics were most effective, wrapping his arms about Chuck. But a hip blocked his driving knee and a rigid forearm slammed against his throat, breaking his hold and driving him back.

He lowered his head and bored in and their big bodies came together with a crash that shook the room.

They stood toe to toe and slugged, with heavy, splitting blows, the rough boards of the floor creaking with their shifting weight. In close Bliss worked an elbow across the face and tried to gouge with his thumb.

Chuck felt the thumbnail scraping the flesh close to his eye. He grasped the wrist in both hands and whirled and heaved. Bliss lurched forward to strike Chuck's extended thigh and crashed to the floor, face down.

He got up a little groggily, and Chuck slashed in two driving blows that buried his fist up to the wrist in the marshal's middle. That broke Bliss in two; he went to his knees and bowed over until his head rapped the floor. He held that pose like a sun worshipper, then rolled over on his side. His long hair fell across his face giving him an almost feminine appearance.

Chuck stepped back and wiped the blood from his mouth where the marshal's elbow had hooked him. The diners stood around in stricken silence, only half believing what they saw.

Bud laid the two guns on a table and walked from the room like a man in a trance. Chuck followed him and outside, Bud whirled and grasped him by the elbow. "Where in hell did you learn to handle yourself like that?" he demanded sharply.

Chuck drew out his pipe and slowly tamped it full.

"You've been gone about ten years," he reminded his brother mildly. "Maybe you're forgettin' that we still have a mite of trouble back there in western Pennsylvania."

Bud nodded but it was plain his mind was on other matters. "Do you know what you just done?" he asked soberly. Without waiting for a reply he continued. "You just gave Suydam Bliss the first fist whippin' he ever had. . . . Can you shoot?"

"A rifle, yes," Chuck admitted. "A revolver—no!"



BUD said reflectively, "Bliss has got a reputation that reaches clear across the state. This whippin' will hit him where he'll feel it most—his pride. From now on it won't make no difference if you pack a gun or not. He'll shoot to

Only a madman or a reckless fool would offer—as did one Yankee cow-puncher—to pilot the rebellious crew of fire-eating Texans up the trail, sworn to bust the record to Dodge or to Hell! Read "That Damnyankee Trail Boss!" Cliff Farrell's great novel, in the current DIME WESTERN. Buy it today at your newsstand!

kill you the first minute he sees you!"

They stood at the intersection of Fleet and Bison and could see all of the former street's wild night action. Salty cowpokes made lusty and dry from months on the trails jammed the board walks and jostled through the outpourings of yellow light from windows and wide flung doors. Pianos tinkled their bawdy invitations and wild Texan cries split the night. A man staggered out of Nick Slade's Steerhead Saloon, the biggest in Meridian, and fell flat on his face in the dust of an alley.

"This is a tough street," Bud said. "One killin' more or less wouldn't make much difference.

"I've got a horse for you down at the livery stable," he continued. "We'll ride out to camp—if Bliss comes lookin' for you out there I reckon we can handle him."

They started down Bison and Chuck saw Avery Smith and Sloan Kinzer, another homesteader, go into Elder's General Store.

"Wait up!" he said. "I want to tell Avery I'll be out in the mornin'." He went into a big room lighted by bracket lamps and heavy with the odors of dry goods and groceries.

Smith and Kinzer were back at the end counter talking to a big man with bowed shoulders. He went up to them and Avery looked up. "Chuck," he said, "this is Jim Elder—councilman."

Chuck took the meaty hand that came across the counter and saw a man in his early forties with thinning hair and a strongly lined face.

"Only two things men come out here for," Elder said. "Land or cattle—you look like land."

"Wrong," said Chuck. "It's cattle."

Elder turned back to Avery. "Where is Bell takin' you?"

"I ain't rightly sure," Avery answered slowly. "Bell says there's fair land 'bout thirty miles west of town but most of the boys seem to favor goin' south of town where there's right good land along Alder Creek."

Elder's big head came up and he laid a sharp gaze upon the two men. "You can't do that," he said curtly. "You'd be plum a-straddle the trail."

"Free land, ain't it?" Kinzer asked.

Elder nodded slowly. "It's free enough," he said grudgingly. "But—damn it all!" he burst out angrily—"you'll ruin our trade."

"We'd leave a road through," Kinzer pointed out.

"It wouldn't do," Elder said testily. "You'd have to fence and no cattleman would drive his stock through a lane of bobwire."

Avery's little goatee jutted aggressively. "If we was to go down to Texas and tell them cattlemen they'd have to give up ranchin' so's their land would be open happen somebody wanted to drive cattle across it—" He paused. "I cal'late you know what they'd say."

"That's different," Elder argued. "They—"

"No different at all," Avery said vigorously. "This is free land and if we claim it and settle on it then its oun, and," he concluded, "nobody's goin' to tell me what to do with it!"

Elder's big face tightened. "You'll have a tough time of it without the town to back you."

"Mebbe," Avery said shortly, "but I cal'late we'll make out." He stamped out of the store followed by Kinzer.

Outside he turned to Chuck. "That settles it," he said grimly. "We're homesteadin' on Alder Creek. See you there in the mornin'."

Bud grinned in the darkness as they headed for the livery stable. "Same old story," he mused. "Sodbusters buckin' cattlemen—bobwire and cattle just don't mix."

"Even if they do fence," Chuck argued, "the trail herds could go around."

"Not the way farmers are streamin' into town," Bud explained. "It's like a land rush. Once they get started they'll have the whole country under their barbwire."

They got their mounts and followed Bison Street straight through town until it emptied out onto the plains where it became a narrow pair of wheel-rutted tracks, stretching out into the dim immensity.

The wagon camp was just outside of town. Fires put a reddish glare on men and women moving about and cast strange shadows on the bulky wagons. As Bud and Chuck went by, a group of men were

gathered together in earnest talk, Kinzer's lanky figure standing out prominently.

With the camp behind them they headed out into thin darkness pricked by scattered points of light from the trail crews.

Bud's camp was some five miles out. Chuck met a few of the boys and then rolled in a blanket for quick, dreamless sleep. . . .

* * *

Nick Slade paced his big barroom, chewing on a rank black cigar while late morning sun glittered hotly on Fleet Streets' dust. His heavy face was white from too little sunlight and his hair and mustache were black and coarse as a horse's mane.

Suydam Bliss came in the end door and walked to the bar with his cat-like tread. He had his morning drink while Slade regarded him from under drawn brows.

"You took your own sweet time in gettin' here," the saloonman growled.

"A man's got to have his sleep, friend," Bliss replied imperturbably, setting down the glass and wiping his tawny mustache.

Slade studied the marshal's battered face, started to say something about it and changed his mind. "Bell is takin' a bunch of homesteaders south of town," he announced.

"So I heard," Bliss said softly. "What you want me to do—break it up?"

"Not just yet," Slade shook his head. "Elder and Bennet are beginning to lean to his side of the fence. We don't want to help 'em along."

"If the trail goes," Bliss pointed out "you go."

"Tell me somethin' I don't know," Slade said irritably. He pulled out another cigar and bit off the end. "No damned bunch of sodbusters is goin' to put me out of business."

"There's about fifty of them," Bliss offered, "and there'll be more on today's train."

"I don't care if there's a hundred," Slade snapped. "They can't hold back those trail herds with their bare hands." He paused. "If they start to fence then it's time to act. You take a ride out there this afternoon and see what they're doin'."

"That's a little out of my regular line," Bliss said idly. "I don't get paid for

patrollin' outside of town. Not my job."

Slade laid a cold gaze on the marshal. "There'll be five hundred in it for you," he said shortly, "when the show's over."

CHAPTER THREE

This Land is Mine!

THE sun was swinging to the top of its arc when Chuck's cowpony forded Alder Creek. Beyond, in the brilliant downpouring of light, Chuck could see a long line of wagons stretched out and people busy making camp. He had left Bud after an early breakfast but when he reached the wagon camp the homesteaders had already left.

Children freed at last from the restraint of the long trip were playing and men were setting up tents while the women busied themselves about fires. Halfway down the line he heard his name called and swung in to halt beside the Smiths.

"There's the land, boy," said Avery with a wave of the hand as Chuck stepped down. "As sweet and level a quarter section as ever you'll see. We're takin' both sides of the creek. . . . I set up markers over there." He pointed south.

Chuck's gaze followed his pointing finger but Avery had stiffened and was still gazing south. "What in tarnation's that!" he ejaculated sharply.

His tone swung Chuck's eyes out to the horizon. Off in the far distance a pall of dust was rising, pushing up into the sky like a big, brown mushroom. Underneath it and in front was a confused blur of cattle. "Looks like another trail herd," he said.

Avery continued to watch the dust cloud. "Dang it all," he burst out, "they're headed right this way!"

Other men had seen the herd by now and were watching somberly. Avery's jaw jutted grimly. "They won't drive over my land," he said. "Martha, fetch me my shotgun!"

"None of that!" Chuck said sharply. "You fire one shot and you'll stampee those cattle." He pointed to the far flung wagons. "There's won't be nothin' left of these camps but matchwood."

"That's right," Martha said, her red face worried. "For a peaceable man,

Avery Smith, you're almighty quick to call for a gun."

Men from the different camps were coming together to form a group and Chuck walked over to them trailed by a subdued Avery. There was a lot of excited talk going on. Sloan Kinzer was in favor of holding them off by force but Chuck squelched the idea of shooting with the threat of a stampede.

Finally Smith, Kinzer and two of the older men were deputized to go out and talk with the trail boss. . . .

A few hours later when the herd had approached near enough for them to pick out individual cattle, work stopped all along the line as the four men chosen to speak got into a wagon and drove off. The three men riding point on the herd spurred ahead to meet them.

Riders and wagon came together out of earshot but within sight of the watchers. There was talk and the men along the line could see Kinzer standing up and moving his hands. Then he stepped down from the wagon.

Chuck looked around at the sound of hoofs and saw Suydam Bliss pace by astride a mouse colored gelding. Chuck stepped to the wagon and picked up Avery's shotgun but Bliss kept moving until he reached the group out on the plain. Kinzer had been talking to the horsemen and now he swung around to face the marshal, who sat at ease on the gelding, looking down at him.

In a few minutes it became apparent that the talk was not going to Kinzer's liking for he waved his arms and the faint tag of a shout came to them.

Abruptly, in almost one motion, Bliss drew his gun and laid the barrel over Kinzer's head. The lanky farmer pitched forward on his face and Bliss swung the gun to cover the men in the wagon.

The riders swung about and rode back to the herd and two of the homesteaders got down and lifted Kinzer into the wagon. Then they headed back for camp, Suydam Bliss riding behind them. The cattle herd moved steadily on.

Anger and apprehension were equally mixed on the faces of the homesteaders as the wagon drew up beside Smith's camp and Sloan Kinzer was helped from it. Suydam Bliss watched, sitting his gelding

with an indolent ease, his round, cat's eyes lambent.

These men had come from the settled east and possessed an ingrained respect for law and order and Suydam's star represented both to them. Thus each man stood grimly by his camp and watched the flood of cattle swell and overrun his section, moving by at a fast gait for they smelled water, while the dust of their passing hung in the air, a yellow, palpable curtain.

Women gathered their children and huddled in the wagons with them, gazing with fearful, unaccustomed eyes. A few tents were knocked down and trampled and anything lying unprotected was trampled and ground into the dust.

While their passing endured, men stood with locked jaws as though the air's burden of dust had weighted down their power of speech. When it was over and the men riding drag had gone by, Suydam Bliss kneeled his horse over to Kinzer.

"There'll be another herd along tomorrow," he drawled in his soft, slumberous voice. "Don't make me come out here again!"

As though his words had broken the spell, Avery Smith jumped upright in the wagon, his white spike of a goatee jutting forward aggressively. "Let me tell you somethin'," he shouted, his voice brittle and squeaky with anger. "This is a free land and no marshal and no town's got the right to keep us offen it. Next time we'll be ready and we won't let no more herds waller over it."

Bliss regarded him, a queer, pale light beginning to shine far back in his eyes. "Don't try it, friend," he said, the silky softness in his voice more ominous than Avery's shouting. "Don't try it." He turned his horse, his eyes flicking over Chuck, and paced quietly from the camp with never a backward look.



EARLY in the afternoon Andrew Bell arrived with another crowd of homesteaders and found the camp drearily inspecting the damage that had been done. He came over to Avery and Chuck. "Had enough of it?" he inquired with a wry smile.

Avery shook his head fiercely and tamped his pipe with a blunt forefinger. "We're throwin' in together to fence the south boundary," he said grimly.

"You'll have to leave a road," Bell pointed out.

"We'll leave a fifty-foot gap," Avery told him, "but the rest of it will be under wire."

"It's the thing to do if you want to hold your land," Bell said soberly. "But I can see plenty of trouble."

"Nothing that's worth having comes easy," Chuck answered quietly—and was surprised. This wasn't his fight.

The newcomers had gone further up the line for their holdings and now the men grouped themselves into gangs, some to cut and haul posts from the wooded hills past town, some to dig post holes and some to set the posts and string the barb-wire on it.

The work went forward swiftly, the homesteaders working steadily in the hot, white sunlight. Farmers all, they were used to long hours of hard, muscular labor and those who came by wagon had been toughened by the trip. They went about it with the air of men who knew their jobs well.

When the wagons came back loaded with freshly cut posts Chuck and his gang quit digging holes and started to set them. A man would stand at the tailboard of a wagon and as a post was set in place swing a maul onto it.

The sun poised on the edge of the plain and slipped off leaving fiery streamers that cooled to gray and violet ash. Camp fires blossomed all along the line and men knocked off in shifts to eat. All night long the wagons rumbled through the stillness and the posts were set and the wire went up. When the sun climbed to the tops of the hills, his fires freshly stoked, gaunt eyed and weary men surveyed their work. Two and a half miles of wire sang in the morning breeze.

An early rider came past, rubbed his eyes to make sure that what he saw was real, and headed his horse for town at a dead run. Chuck turned to Avery squatted by the fire with a cup of black coffee. "There goes the bad news high-tailin' it for town. From now on your peace and quiet is over."

Andrew Bell came out from town in the middle of the forenoon leading another wagon train of homesteaders. "You boys certainly blew the lid off things," he told them. "A Cross B rider came in with the news and the town is bubbling like a stew pot."

But Avery had no time for him for his son Billy had arrived with the teams and wagon. Billy was a short, compact kid in his early twenties with his father's sharp gray eyes and shock of taffy colored hair.

Chuck met him and then drifted over to where Bell was talking to Kinzer. "I told the merchants that they'd be better off with a steady, year 'round income from you homesteaders," he was saying, "but that means Fleet Street dies. I think Jim Elder and Ike Bennet are swingin' around to agree with me but Nick Slade and his Fleet Street crowd control the council—and Suydam Bliss is Slade's man."

"What can they do?" Kinzer asked dryly. "The fence is up."

"That I can't say," Bell replied slowly. "but I know Nick Slade won't take it lying down." He pointed to the south where another dust cloud was rising. "That herd will reach your southern boundary by mid-afternoon—then you'll have your test; whether your fence holds or goes down!"

* * *

Suydam Bliss came into the Steershead and prowled across the room to where Nick Slade leaned behind the bar. "Heard the news?" he asked the saloon man in his drowsy voice.

"The fence?" Slade said sourly. "Who hasn't."

The marshal poured a drink and downed it. "You want me to go out and tear it down?"

Slade shook his head. "The town's split now with Elder and Bennet swingin' over to the other side—no sense makin' it worse. I got a better way." He stood silent his unshaven face dark with secret musings.

Bliss knew better than to press him further. He took another drink and started for the door. Slade's voice, heavy with portent, stopped the killer marshal halfway there.

"Stick on Fleet Street tonight. To hell with the rest of town!"

IN THE growing tension that gripped the camp, weary men found it impossible to sleep. As the onward creeping dust cloud loomed nearer, men left, singly or in twos and threes, to take stations along the fence. A few carried rifles or shotguns but mostly they were unarmed.

These men acted not from a unified command but individually, with a grim and stubborn purpose to hold what they considered their own. As Kinzer put it, "Looks like these cattlemen want this land left a wilderness a-purpose for them to drive their cattle over it—and them not ownin' a foot of ground."

Chuck moved about aimlessly. A deep seated, dissatisfied restlessness which he could not define gnawed at him. There was no point in his staying on now that Billy had arrived and yet he found that he didn't want to leave.

He looked over at the Smith's camp and saw Bud talking with Lanna. Her face was raised to him and she was smiling at something he had said. Chuck walked towards them and the restlessness and dissatisfaction deepened. Lanna looked at him and smiled and looked back to Bud.

"Now that Billy's arrived there's nothin' to keep you here," Bud said.

"I suppose not," Chuck said tonelessly.

The smile left Lanna's face and she looked at him as though trying to see what thoughts were moving behind his gray eyes.

Martha Smith came from behind the wagon and shaded her eyes to stare at the approaching dust column. "My," she panted, "a body'd most think these Texans owned the earth the way they carry on."

Avery Smith and Kinzer came up. "We're goin' out to warn 'em off," he told Chuck. "You want to come along?"

Chuck looked quickly at Bud. "You in a hurry?"

"Not me," Bud said, his glance quizzical. "I'll stay here. You go along and have your fun."

Chuck got his horse and rode out with Avery and Kinzer who were mounted on heavy draft animals. They headed for the gap in the fence left open for the road. Here the main trouble would be. They

went through seeing two men on guard at each side.

The Texans had seen the fence and were spurring up ahead of the herd which moved along faster, lured by the scent of fresh water. The trail boss, a big, bronze faced man with graying hair, swung his cowpony broadside and yelled, "Yuh're blockin' the trail! Get that damned fence down!"

Chuck mistrusted Kinzer's hot headedness and moved ahead of him. "Private land, now," he said. "You'll have to use the road or go around."

Other riders scenting trouble were racing up from the sides of the herd. "If yuh reckon I'll put them cattle through a lane of bobwire," the trail boss roared in exasperation, "yuh damn farmers got a lot to learn!" he wheeled his horse. "To hell with the fence, put 'em—" His words were chopped off by a roll of gunfire from the rear of the herd.

The big Texan stiffened in his saddle. He jerked out a startled curse, then he and the riders were cutting in front of the herd, trying to hold them before they got started—but too late.

Over the continued boom of guns came a heavy, thunderous rumble as the cattle in back started to run, crowding into the ones in front.

The men were engulfed or brushed aside as panic swept the herd. It crashed ahead in a mad rush, tails up and horns clicking in the press. Chuck, Kinzer and Avery caught in the crazy tide, swung and went with it, the heavy horses galloping clumsily.

The fence went down and was kicked to pieces as though it had never been and steers boiled over the plain, sweeping everything before them. Tents disappeared, wagons were overturned, their wheels spinning in the air, and some of the heavier prairie schooners stood out as isolated islands in a sea of cattle. The air was full of choking dust and the pound of hoofs shook the earth and filled the ears with a heavy reverberating rumble.

Carried along in the press Chuck worked to the spot where the Smiths' wagon momentarily split the herd. Unaccustomed to cattle, the startling suddenness of the stampede had caught the homesteaders off balance.

He pulled the sorrel hard over and fought into the backwash in the lea of the wagon where Bud sat his horse. Lanna and her mother were under the canopied top, watching the disaster with white faces.

"What crazy fool started shootin'?" Bud shouted angrily.

"None of us," Chuck shouted back. "It came from the rear."

A light caught and grew in Bud's eye and he turned back to watch the cattle lunging past within arm's reach. The Kinzer's big wagon had been caught broadside and overturned and Chuck could see Mrs. Kinzer crouched under the wagon body hugging her two children tightly to her.



MEN were running towards them from each end of the fence trying to reach those trapped by the herd but no man could breast that torrent of hoofs and horns. A steer lunged over a wagon tongue and went down bawling with a broken leg. He struggled to gain his feet but the violent, surging press of cattle knocked him over on his side and he was submerged.

The steady, ceaseless roar and rumble, the swirling dust, created a tumult in men's minds that nullified the passage of time so that they stood and stared numbly like people rendered dumb by the might and intensity of a hurricane.

The herd at last thinned out and on its heels came swift riders, urging them on with flying loops and popping guns. Bandanas covered the lower parts of their faces and their hats were pulled low.

Chuck noticed Bud back his horse from the wagon and swung him around. He didn't realize the significance of the move until Bud's rope shot out, the loop landing around the shoulders of the nearest man and tightening. Bud's pony braced himself for the shock and the man was jerked from the saddle to hit the ground with a crash and roll.

It came to Chuck then and he was off his horse and running to the man with Bud close behind. They reached him where he lay motionless, knocked out by the fall, and Bud reached down and

jerked loose the bandana. For seconds he was silent, studying the face's hard angles and its thick lipped mouth. When he straightened up his eyes held a sure brightness and he heaved a gusty sigh. "Like I thought," Bud said, "he's Tug Murphy, one of Nick Slade's hard-case lot."

Men reached them then, their faces drawn and sweaty, shaken by what they had been through. A homesteader gasped, his voice cracking, "this is awful—awful! Two men trampled—wagons smashed—horses gone—fence busted to hell. Damn them Texans!"

Bud stepped in front of the man. "You're on the wrong track. Fleet Street toughs stampeded the herd and wrecked your camp."

"It was Texas cattle, wasn't it?" the homesteader growled.

"Sure," Bud assented, "but you can't blame the trail crew. They never fired a shot." He turned on his heel and went over to his horse. He came back, leading him and bent over to grasp Tug Murphy by the shoulders.

"Give me a hand, Chuck," he said. They lifted the man and threw him across the horse's back and Bud stepped into the saddle.

"Where you headin'?" Chuck asked.

"I aim to find those Texans," Bud said quietly, "and head 'em off afore they decide it was homesteaders that stampeded their cattle and come back to clean up the camp."

Avery came into camp on a lathered and blown horse holding Billy Smith propped in his arms. The boy's face was pain drawn and white under his tan. Chuck reached up and eased him to the ground and found that he was wringing wet.

"Got his ribs smashed," Avery said huskily. "The river's jammed with dead cattle and he was in there with 'em—got pitched offen his horse. It's a God's wonder he ain't dead!"

They put Billy in the big wagon and Chuck came outside. The sun was sliding down the western sky like a spinning red wheel and in its slanting light men were working to bring some order out of the chaos. Wagons were being righted and slashed and trampled tents lifted from out

of the dirt and dust. Women went about salvaging scattered household goods.

In all this activity there was a grim, intense silence that told more than words how deeply this blow had struck. A man picked up a battered cook pot and beat it against a wheel to straighten it with a savage intensity. Each ringing blow against the iron rim sounded a warning of the gathering wrath of these men of the soil.

Chuck walked among them and watched the trouble clouds gather. Men stopped in their passing to exchange a few low voiced words and go on. There was no speech making, no wordy harranguing but he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that these men were going to invade Fleet Street—just as they had banded together to build the fence.

This was their heritage from days of revolution and border strife; when danger threatened they moved to meet it in a body, no man holding back. They would take rifles or shotguns or their own knotty fists and attempt to close this street of lustful evil that had worked them such harm. For there would be no security, no peaceful raising of crops and children until Fleet Street was dead. Chuck could foresee it clearly and approaching trouble laid its heavy shadow over his spirit.

He too was of the soil, tied by a bond he had not known existed until now; and he knew he would go with them. Stalking largely in his mind's eye was the tawny, cat-like figure of Suydam Bliss with his two low-slung guns and looming in the background, the nebulous, threatening figure of Nick Slade whom he had never seen.

CHAPTER FOUR

On Fleet Street . . .

FLEET STREET was in full swing. Cowponies rocked and raced along its deep dust, their riders howling full voiced at the moon; trail crews crowded and jostled on the plank walks and the open doors of saloons and amusement places spilled light and discordant racket. In the Paradise Dance Hall fiddles were squeaking the boots along and swinging figures passed the open windows. Over all was the rank smell of whiskey and

sweating humanity and swirling dust.

Nick Slade's Steershead five bartenders sweated to serve the crowd, and the gambling rigs were going full blast. Slade, clean shaven now and wearing a fresh white shirt, moved among them, a mask of jovial hospitality on his dark face. His lips smiled and uttered hearty good fellowships but in his eyes was the coldness of dank sea depths.

Suydam Bliss paused in his prowling at the door, got a nod from Slade and moved off down the street. A man came in working his way to reach Slade.

"There's a crowd of men comin' down from Bison," he said softly. "Must be fifty or sixty—they look like bad medicine."

Slade's face tightened. He moved to the bar and slapped his hand upon it. Then his eyes went about the room, picking up bouncers and hard-cases, one by one. . . .

* * *

A man moved out of the deep shadows. Chuck shaded his eyes from the glare of the Cochran House windows and saw it was Bud. "No need for you to mix in this," he said. "It ain't your fight."

Bud chuckled deep in his chest, a chuckle of lusty joy at the night's promise and his face wore a look of pure deviltry.

"I've got my reasons for getting in on the fun," he said.

Half a block from Bison a man was running down Fleet Street. He paused at the Steershead to look back and dived through the doorway.

"There goes the news," Bud drawled. "Now you'd best keep away from the front—slide down the first alley you reach and come at it from the back." He moved off down the street.

The group of men stirred restlessly and a voice asked:

"What are we waitin' for? Let's get on with it!"

The tall, bowed figure of Jim Elder came along Bison and turned into Fleet. The yellow light from a window glinted on a rifle in the bend of his arm. He looked at the homesteaders with weary sympathy. "You boys don't know what you're gettin' into," he said heavily, "but I guess there's no other way out—me and Ike Bennet has decided to play along

with you." He stepped back into the shadows of the hotel. "I'll stay here and maybe I can help you out later on."

"You're takin' damn good care of your hide," a homesteader snapped.

"It ain't that," Elder protested. "I've been in the same town with these men for years. I can't help bust up their places, even though the time has come for them to go."

The man grunted and the crowd moved off to the first alley. They turned into it and went along its narrow blackness and came out in back of the buildings that fronted on Fleet Street. Chuck walked in the lead with Avery and Kinzer, and the picture of Lanna saying good-by, with the firelight bright on her hair, was limned against the night's velvety dark. Then it was blotted out as they came to the rear entrance of the Steershead and stepped inside.

The bright light was a shock to his eyes and he shaded them and stepped to one side as sodbusters crowded through the doorway. They surged into the recess at the end of the bar and one of the sweating bartenders let out a yell of warning. Nick Slade made a half turn and jumped for the bar to grasp the heavy billy that a barkeep tossed him. The crowd became a fluid, moving mass as bouncers and gamblers drove through it, converging from all parts of the room.

Chuck stepped through the end bar gate as the nearest bartender swung a billy. He caught the descending wrist and then he and the man were driven along the narrow confines between bar and backbar by the surging force of men behind him. Bartenders went down and were trampled as they fought and clutched at men's legs.

Slade leaned over the bar to swing his billy and a sodbuster groaned and went down, his chin striking the polished bar surface. A bottle smashed on Slade's head and he reeled away, pawing raw whiskey from his eyes.

But the homesteaders were bent on destruction. They heaved and the bar went over with a crash and a jangle of breaking glass. Then the bouncers and housemen surged over it and the battle was on.

The Texans gave a whoop of delight and piled in. There was no concerted line of attack; the sodbusters simply swarmed

over and around the ruined bar and each started to work on the man handiest. The room was filled with the surging, twisting bodies of men, their quick, strained breathing and yells, the sound of blows.

Bottles sailed through the air to smash against walls or mirrors; tables and gambling rigs went down to splintering ruin; men crawled on the floor among the trampling forest of legs and stamping feet or simply curled in a ball with arms overhead for protection.

Outside a gun blasted twice and a shrill voice yelled, "Bar O. . . Bar O!"

Chuck remembered Bar O was Bud's outfit but a man got up off the floor and came at him just then and he had no further time to think. Mingled blood and whiskey ran down the man's face and stained his white shirt and his eyes held a wild, crazy light.

"Smash my place will you!" he screamed and swung a billy.

Chuck thought, so this is Slade, and shifted to one side. The billy landed high on his shoulder, numbing it completely. He drove his right fist into the man's face and when the head snapped back moved in and smashed him again.

The room was becoming more crowded as men from the street piled in knifing through the crowd. Slade went backward and tripped and fell heavily. He rolled over on his face and pushed himself up. Blood ran from his split lips and his white face had the look of death. His hand moved to his waist band and lamplight glowed dully on the gray barrel of a deringer. He swung it up—and went backwards as though hit by a strong wind, a black hole gaping in his shirt's whiteness.

The gun roar had come from Chuck's left and now he looked and saw Bud standing close by, a wisp of smoke trailing from his gun barrel. Bud was staring at Slade with a steady watchfulness but the boss of Fleet Street lay amid the floor's wreckage without stirring, his shirt front slowly turning crimson.

◆ ◆ ◆

THE fighting spread and moved out of doors racking along the plank walks and engulfing the street. Behind the turmoil the lights in the Steers-

head went out and all that was left of its garish splendor was a ruined shambles tainted by the stink of burnt wicks and spilled whiskey.

A man broke through the swaying eddies of the fight and ran down the street. His voice, high pitched and strident came back to them, "... damn it to hell, turn out your lights! Turn out your lights. ... Do you want your places wrecked?"

The night's madness touched the salty riders of the plain, flaming brightly their hatred and distrust of trail towns and the evil that thrived within them, sparking the spirit of riotous devilry that slumbered never too far beneath the surface. Texan left off fighting Texan and homesteader and turned to wrecking Fleet Street. As a winded trail man said to Chuck.

"What in hell are we fightin' each other for? ... It was Fleet Street started the stampede."

The mob moved up Fleet toward Bison and swirled into the next place, tearing off the swinging doors and kicking in windows. The saloon's own bouncers and bartenders met them just inside, reinforced by men from other places who wanted to stop this riot before it reached their own establishments. And through this fighting, cursing jamb of men the homesteaders moved, grim and silent, intent on smashing this street so utterly that it would never rise again.

Chuck's iron-hard fists hammered out a path to the gambling rigs and Avery, clutching his shotgun, followed in his wake. Men charged him to preserve the tools of their trade. Chuck grappled with the nearest, lifted him bodily and crashed him down on the faro layout. A strangled sound from Avery caused him to whirl. A gambler had his arms wrapped around the little homesteader from behind while another man slugged him squarely in the face.

Chuck's long arm reached out and spun the slugger about. His fist drove him clear of the floor and dropped him in a sodden heap. The gambler dropped Avery and fled. Avery sagged to the floor, the shotgun slipping from his fingers.

Chuck picked up the little man and deposited him behind an overturned table. He scooped up the shotgun and turned to see Jim Elder come into the room and

work his way to the center beside Bud and Kinzer. . . .

Suydam Bliss loitered in the alley's dimness. He had been at the far end of Fleet Street when the riot broke out in the Steershead; it had moved out into the street by the time he had arrived. He had stood to one side and watched its ebb and flow, knowing the futility of attempting to quell a riot of this size and having no wish to be pounded and lost in the obscurity of street fighting. He had watched the mob move down to the next saloon and surge into it and had stood silently waiting while the place was wrecked.

From old experience with trouble he judged the moment when his arrival would be the most effective, when the mob's thirst for destruction had been sated and the fire of battle had died down.

Then Suydam Bliss moved, prowling across the street on cat-like feet, motivated by hunger for fame and a lust to kill, his long fingers caressing the notched handles of his low-slung Colts. He would be the man who quelled Meridian's riot single handed and his name would sound across the state.



JIM ELDER paused beside Kinzer and his voice carried through the room's lessening din. "All right, boys, the fun's over. Slade is dead and the street's closed. It'll never open again. His glance picked out the Texans. "You can carry the word down trail that Meridian is closed to trail herds—from now on this is a farming town."

In the sudden quiet Suydam Bliss stalked into the room, his coldly shining, lambent eyes searching for victims.

Elder eyed him with quick distrust. "No need to horn in, Bliss," he said sharply. "The trouble's over and we won't need you no more. You can turn in your badge."

But Bliss was not to be balked of his hour of glory. His eyes fastened on Bud and Kinzer and then moved to Chuck and narrowed, oblivious of Elder's words. "I told you boys to keep out of town," he purred sibilantly. "Now you'll pay for your fun!"

Kinzer was unarmed but Bud was

packing a gun. Bliss' feline figure moved in a gunman's crouch and his hands dropped to his gun butts with the speed of a striking hawk.

Chuck was still holding the shotgun, waist high, and as the marshal's hands reached his guns Chuck tilted up the muzzle and pulled both triggers.

The force drove Bliss backwards, rocking him on his feet, his guns blasting lead at the floor. But even with his death load in his chest he did not go down at once. His guns came up and roared once. A thunderbolt struck Chuck so that he did not know when he hit the floor. . . .

Sunlight and noise from the street came in at the open window. Chuck moved his aching head and the hotel room swam into focus. Bud stirred in his chair beside the bed and a grin of relief crossed his face. "I reckon you'll be all right," he said. "Bliss' bullet parted your hair."

He stood up, juggling a roll of bills encircled with a pink armband. "They lifted my roll in the Stearshead last night, I got it back from Nick Slade's safe."

He pocketed it and moved to the foot of the bed. "We can pull out in two, three days and we'll have company; Billy Smith wants to go along."

A stirring beside the bed caused Chuck to turn his head. Lanna was looking at him with wide, grave eyes.

"What does Avery think of Billy's go-

ing?" he asked the lovely blonde girl. "It's up to Billy," she said. "He's of age."

Chuck's gaze went past her out into the open sunlight. He gazed unseeingly, remembering many things, the tight little checkerboard farms back in Pennsylvania, the big red barn with its gilded horse swinging about the weathervane, the smooth feel of the plowhandles beneath his palms and the tug of the lines about his waist. . . .

He looked back to Lanna. "That piece of land next to your dad's—would he mind if I kept it?"

A light came into her eyes. "He'd be glad," she said simply.

"And you?"

Lanna didn't answer but the light in her eyes grew and gave him his answer.

Chuck turned to Bud. "I won't be going with you," he said. "I guess I'm too much of a farmer to get far away from the land."

Bud grinned down at them with a world of understanding. "I don't know as I blame you, Chuck," he said softly and went out.

Lanna stared after him, a soft smile playing about her lips.

"You like him, don't you?" Chuck asked.

"Very much," Lanna said softly. "He'll make a wonderful brother-in-law."

THE END

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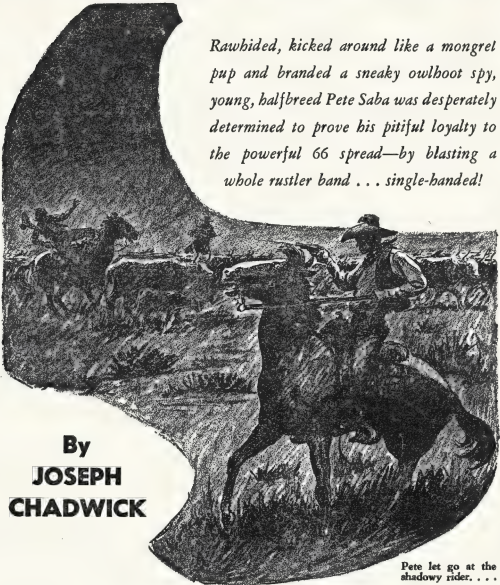


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Open Range For Owlhooters

Rawhided, kicked around like a mongrel pup and branded a sneaky owlhoot spy, young, halfbreed Pete Saba was desperately determined to prove his pitiful loyalty to the powerful 66 spread—by blasting a whole rustler band . . . single-handed!

By
**JOSEPH
CHADWICK**



Pete let go at the shadowy rider. . . .

EVEN as a kid, out Tucson way, young Pete Saba had been an out-cast. But now, riding for Chris Hayden's big 66 outfit, he forgot about his dark skin and let a warm glow of pride fill him. For a halfbreed, he was pretty lucky.

Pete rode in late, after chow time, that evening. The other 66 hands were already

lounging around the bunkhouse, smoking and chinning, joshing each other and maybe playing some practical jokes on the Chinaman cook. Pete called out, "Hiya, hombres," through the soft darkness, then stepped down and unsaddled and turned his horse into the feed corral.

There was a sudden quiet over by the bunkhouse, but Pete tried not to notice.

The other hands weren't always friendly toward him. It was taking time for them to become used to a breed about the spread.

Pete swung his saddle and bridle up onto the top bar, then left the corral. He sang out to the Chinaman to fill a plate with grub, then filled a basin at the pump and carried it to the wash-up bench against the bunkhouse wall.

He splashed water over his dusky face, lathered with a bar of strong home-made soap, got lather in his eyes and fumbled blindly for one of the flour-sack towels that usually hung from nails on the wall. He couldn't locate a towel, and his eyes were stinging from the soap, so he felt quite pleased when Ike Harlon, a lank and leathery puncher, stepped up and said: "Here's a flour sack, Pete."

Pete took the sack, said, "Thanks, amigo," and started drying his face. His eyes still stung a little after he got them open, and he saw that Ike Harlon had moved back to the group of resting riders. Pete hung the cloth on a nail, walked over to the lighted bunkhouse door. But then Ike Harlon knocked the thought of grub out of him.

Ike said, "Wal, fan my breeches! The Breed's turnin' white like a human bein'! Look at him, gents. That's what you call gildin' the lily!"

The crew had been waiting for that, and a roar of laughter lifted.

Pete swung about, his lean body stiffening. He didn't know what had happened, but he felt hurt inside—hurt badly. He felt like a homeless Mex cur that has been kicked. He felt the same inner pain as when, as a button, the other youngsters had taunted him by chanting, "Pete Saba is a breed! Pete Saba is a breed—ya, ya, yah!"

Ike Harlon was bent double with laughter. "Look at that face, will you!" he gasped, then guffawed again.

Pete reached up and felt at his face. His fingers touched something pasty. He turned to the light and saw that his fingers were stained white with flour paste. He understood then. Ike Harlon had given him a sack hat had never been washed. The flour clinging to the cloth had smeared over his wet face, coating it white. It was quite a joke. Pete tried to hide his hurt, tried to laugh it off.

But Ike Harlon wouldn't let it go at that. The lanky cowhand said loudly, "Maybe it's a disguise. Maybe he's wearin' a white mask so nobody will know he rode in late—after a meetin' with the Harbin crowd that's been rustlin' Sixty-six stock!"

Pete didn't know if that was to be funny or not. He noticed that the other cowboys stopped laughing abruptly. His hurt eased up then, but only because a savage rage swept through him. Pete stepped down from the doorway.

"Ike, you got to take that back!"

"To hell with you, kid. Like I been sayin' around here to the boys—I don't trust no breed!"

Pete lunged forward, slamming out with his fists. Ike Harlon side-stepped and drove a solid punch into his stomach. Pete grunted, the wind puffing out of him, yet he paused but a second. He closed in again, and Ike rocked his head back with a blow to the jaw. The lanky cowboy fought coolly, spitefully, battering at the youngster's face and body. Pete went down once, flat on his face, but he came up and rushed again. His punches were wild.

Ike laughed mockingly. "Shucks, kid—you ought to use a knife, like all breeds do!" He contemptuously slapped Pete with the flat of his hand.

That brought angry tears to the kid's eyes. He swung again, and it was a lucky blow. Catching Ike squarely on the chin, he knocked the cowboy over backward. Ike lay sprawled there, his eyes glinting with hatred. Pete turned away, feeling sick at heart.

"Heads up, Pete!" one of the watching hands called out.

Pete swung about and saw that Ike had come to his knees and was drawing his gun. Pete knew he had no chance, but he grabbed for his sixgun. He had it cleared of leather when Mark Barron, the 66's big ramrod, stepped into the circle and kicked the gun from Ike Harlon's fist. A quick silence closed down. The light from the doorway showed Barron's face dark with fury.

"There'll be no gunplay here," the foreman finally said. "And the next hand that rides the kid can collect his pay. That's final."

Ike Harlon said nothing. He got up

and held the hand Barron had kicked.

Mark Barron stood spread-legged, looking at the faces of the men about him. He had just come from the ranch-house, from a meeting with the 66's owner, and there was a troubled look in his eyes.

"Men, like you know," he said, "the Sixty-six has been losin' a lot of stock lately. Today Mr. Hayden was in town, and a swamper in one of the saloons gave him a tip. This swamper overheard two hard-cases talkin' about makin' a big haul on the Sixty-six tonight. Those hard-cases belong to Sam Harbin's wild bunch."



THERE was a heavy quiet then, and Pete Saba could see that the news gave the crew a shock. Everybody in the Southwest knew about the Harbin crowd. Sam Harbin himself was notorious as a killer and an escaped convict from Yuma Prison, and his band played any game from rustling to bank robbery.

Mr. Hayden figures we could set a trap," Mark Barron went on. "It'll be a gun battle, and most likely some of us will stop hot lead. Nobody's ordered to go. It won't be held against the man who says 'no.'" Barron waited in his quiet, self-assured way.

Finally somebody said, "Shucks, Mark—it's only women what says 'no.'"

The ramrod laughed softly, then outlined his plan of defense. The 66 would ambush the rustlers. Harbin would probably lead his crew in from the south, attempt to raid the big herds at Black Mesa and drive the rustled cattle south into the badlands.

"We'll out-smart him," Barron said. "We'll hit him from two sides."

He tolled off eight men, naming each in turn, and told them to ride out for Black Mesa. He named six more men and instructed them to head for Wild Creek.

That accounted for the whole crew except Pete Saba, and disappointment hit the youngster like a below-the-belt punch. He stood there and watched the crew rush into the bunkhouse for their shooting-irons and to the corral for their horses. Mark Barron started to turn away, to meet Chris Hayden who was coming up, but Pete went to him.

"Mark, you plumb forgot me."

Barron faced about. "Didn't forget you, Pete. You saddle and ride north to the line cabin at the Gap. And keep your eyes open, up there."

Pete didn't like that; he was being sent where there wouldn't be any trouble. It seemed that Mark Barron didn't trust him enough to let him ride with the ambush parties. Pete wanted to protest, but Chris Hayden, the 66's white-maned owner, was staring coldly at him.

Hayden spoke low-voiced, but not so low Pete's keen ears didn't hear: "Mark, you're not trustin' this kid?"

"Sure, Chris. Pete's a good hand with a gun, and he can see like a cat in the dark."

"Yeah," muttered Hayden, his voice harsh and intolerant. "But is he loyal to the Sixty-six? Somebody in the crew is a Harbin hand."

"No need to worry," Mark Barron said. "Pete is loyal—to me." He jerked a nod at Pete, telling him to ride out before Hayden could tell him to stay put. . . .

There was no moon and the night was pitch dark. Young Pete headed across the range at a lope. The pinto between his legs was good horseflesh, and the sixgun at his side was loose in its holster. Pete hoped there would be trouble at the Gap, so that he could handle it and prove to Mark Barron that he deserved the big ramrod's trust.

The kid marveled at the kindness Barron showed him. Tonight hadn't been the first time the foreman sided him. That day two months ago when Pete drifted into Flat Rock, as addle bum, he had been jumped by a crowd of half-drunk cowpokes. He had fought savagely against odds, taking a bad beating, until Barron came along.

Pete hadn't known the big man, but he found that he was a good hand with his fists. Between them, they beat off the cowpokes and made them call quits. Bloody and battered, Barron and Pete shook hands and went for a drink together. Barron told his name and asked if Pete was looking for a job.

Pete had said, "Most folks won't hire me steady."

"The Sixty-six will," Barron had told him. "Ride out."

It hadn't mattered to the ramrod that he was a breed.

Pete rode past herds of 66 cattle bedded down for the night. He came finally to the line cabin, which stood a quarter mile from North Gap. The Gap was a narrow pass in the jagged hills which ran from east to west and were the north boundary of the 66.

It was lonely there at the line cabin, and tonight the cabin seemed a million miles from the ranch proper. He rode through the Gap, which was about a half mile long, then, finding no signs of night riders, returned to the cabin. He stepped down, squatted with his back to the cabin wall and lighted a quirly smoke. Time dragged. He guessed the crew, waiting in ambush, would have all the fun.

Close to midnight the sounds of a slow-walked horse lifted him up with gun in hand. He called, "Sing out, hombre!"

Mark Barron's voice answered, "It's me, Pete—Mark Barron."

Pete was surprised; he had figured that the ramrod would stay with the crew and be in on the ambush. But Barron, reining in, explained himself by saying, "Pete, Mr. Hayden didn't like it none that I sent you out here. I'm plumb sorry, kid, but you better ride back and turn in for the night. I'll stand guard here at the Gap myself."

Pete swallowed hard, but the lump that had come into his throat stayed there, choking him. His shoulders sagged as he turned to his horse. It took him two tries to get his foot into the stirrup.

Barron stepped down and walked over. "Pete, don't take this too hard."

Pete didn't answer that. But he wanted to say, as he had wanted to say a thousand times before in his young life: "I can't help bein' a breed. Ain't my fault my old man was a squaw-man!"

Barron guessed at his thoughts. "No matter what some folks say, Pete, the color of a man's skin don't really matter. It's what is in heart that counts. More'n most of us, you're a part of the West. It's your country, son. Keep rememberin' that."

Pete nodded jerkily. "I guess I savvy what you mean," he muttered, then swung his pinto about and rode off into the darkness.

SLOW-WALKING his horse, Pete was slumped dejectedly in the saddle: He was grateful to Mark Barron, the finest man he had ever known, but he couldn't stay on at the 66. He would ride in, pack his warbag, ask Chris Hayden for his money, then start drifting. There wasn't any place here for him. A breed just didn't belong. A breed wasn't—

A sudden sound jarred him out of his gloomy reverie. He pulled the pinto to a halt, peered into the darkness, and saw a rider over by one of the 66 herds. He slipped to the ground, guided his horse in among a screen of mesquite, then drew his gun and waited.

The rider idled a minute over by the cattle, then drifted toward the spot where Pete was hidden. His actions were odd; it did not seem likely that he was a 66 hand, yet he did not act like a rustler itching to use a long rope. Pete holstered his gun and reached for his lasso.

The rider was close now, within throwing distance. Pete's loop snaked out and settled, and Pete gave a quick heave that dragged the man from the saddle. The fellow hit the ground with a thump, then Pete slammed down on him. Twisting wildly, the man tried to grab out his gun. Pete hit him on the chin and the man's teeth clicked loudly. Then Pete took his gun and slung it out into the darkness.

"What's the idea?" It was Ike Harlon's sour voice. "You locoed breed, get off me!"

Suspicion filled Pete's mind. Ike Harlon was supposed to be with the crew, not riding out by the Gap. Pete recalled the talk about there being someone on the 66 payroll who was working secretly with the Harbin wild bunch. Pete kept his weight on the lanky cowboy.

"What you doin' here, hombre?"

"None of your business, breed!"

Pete drew back a threatening fist. "Talk!" he ordered.

"All right—you're askin' for it," Ike Harlon growled. "Chris Hayden sent me. He don't trust you none. He figured you might be the sneak that's contactin' the Harbin outfit."

"That's a lie!" Pete muttered. "Hayden just sent Mark Barron. He wouldn't've sent you too. Hombre, I'm thinkin' you're that sneak!"

"Why, you crazy breed—" Harlon began, but the words were smashed against his lips. Pete had hit him again, for now the night had come alive. Night riders had come in through the Gap and were cutting into the 66 herds. Harbin had struck not from the badlands, but from the north.

Cattle were bawling. There was a thunder of suddenly milling hoofs. Harsh voices were yelping. Pete rolled Ike Harlon over on his back and used the lass-ropes to truss him up. He didn't want the 66's traitor to make a getaway. Pete dragged the unconscious man into the stand of mesquite. He mounted the pinto and rode out at a wild lope.

The rustlers had stopped the milling, and now the cattle were heading toward the mouth of the Gap. Pete wondered why Mark Barron was not trying to stop the drive. He shouted, "Hiya, Hiya!" and fired at a dark figure riding drag to the herd.

The rider gave a shrill warning whistle, then his gun flashed its quick flame. Pete fired again and saw the rustler topple from the saddle. Another night rider turned his gun on Pete. The kid fired once, then something struck him a terrific blow. He reeled sideways in the saddle just as the pinto pinwheeled, and he fell before he had a chance to grab leather.

He hit the ground hard, knew only intense pain for a long moment, then he tried to get up. He got to his knees, then sprawled again. The drive pushed into the Gap.

There was the warm, moist stickiness of flowing blood at his left side, and pain along his ribs. He fought down giddiness, then tried again to reach his feet. He made it finally, and staggered like a drunk through the darkness. He choked on dust. The rustled herd had vanished into the Gap. He felt his knees buckle and he reeled against a boulder, leaned weakly against it.

One of the rustlers back-trailed, pulled up within twenty yards of the boulder. Another rider came out of the darkness. The voices of the two men jumped back and forth, across the space of forty feet. Pete tried to lift his gun and bring it to bear.

"Who was doin' that shootin'?" one

voice demanded out of the darkness.

"I don't know, Sam," the other voice said.

"He got one of my boys. I shot him out of the saddle."

"Clear out, Sam—whoever it was, he may not be dead."

The rustler grunted and swung his horse about, vanishing into the Gap. Pete knew that it had been Sam Harbin himself. The kid had gotten his gun trained on the outlaw, but he had been unable to fire. He had been numbed with shock, and still was. For the man who talked with Harbin was—Mark Barron.

Barron turned his horse and rode toward the rock. He saw Pete and he pulled up, staring. "So it was you doin' the shootin' out there, Pete," he said flat-voiced. "I figured you'd be at the ranch by now."

Pete felt sick at heart. The one person he had believed in was a traitor. He said, "You're one of them, Mark. You wear an outlaw brand. You had it all figured out—sendin' me here first so you'd have a good reason to come and help that wild bunch. You figured on tellin' Mr. Hayden you put up a fight but couldn't stop them. Mark, you're a curly wolf!"

"Pete," Barron said, "you stopped lead."

Pete had not realized it but he was slowly slumping down. There a haze before his eyes. He felt Barron grab hold of him. The 66's betrayer was shouldering him, carrying him to his horse. Funny, but Mark Barron was siding him again. . . .



MARK BARRON got him to the line cabin. He laid Pete upon a bunk, then built a fire in the potbellied stove and heated water. Barron opened Pete's shirt, washed the wound and bandaged it. Making coffee, he gave Pete some to drink, then he stood over by the door and rolled a smoke. His face was dark and stiff.

"What you figure on doin', Pete?" he wanted to know. "You goin' to ride in and tell Chris Hayden?"

"No," Pete said bitterly. "Like you said before, I'm loyal to you." He rose from the bunk after gulping the last of the

coffee. Knowing about Mark Barron made him feel all empty inside, but he no longer felt badly from the wound. He took up his sombrero, then dropped his hand to his holstered gun.

"But I owe the Sixty-six somethin' too," he went on. "Mark, I'm walkin' out of here. I'm ridin' after that Harbin crowd. It's got to be now, because by mornin' they'll have reached the badlands and there'll be no finding them." He stood spread-legged, his dark eyes narrow and bright. "And I'm askin' you, mister, to ride with me!"

The quirky drooped from Barron's taut lips. Smoke wafted lazily before his eyes. He seemed to be thinking hard, but finally he just shrugged his wide shoulders.

Pete stepped to the door. "So you're all lobo?"

"Pete, it's somethin' bigger than me—somethin' I was born with, like you and your half-breed skin." Barron's voice was lifeless. "My old man was hanged, my two brothers died in a stage holdup they tried to pull. I did time in Yuma Prison."

"You had a good job here at the Sixty-six," Pete reminded him.

"Sure. A camp rat might have grub cached away, but it'll steal more just for the hell of it. It's sort of like gamblin' blood, Pete. I saw how rich the Sixty-six was, and I wanted some of that wealth. So I sent for Sam Harbin."

Barron dropped his quirky, ground it under his boot heel, then he swung toward Pete Saba, hitting at his jaw. But Pete had watched for such an attack. He ducked the blow, struck out with his right fist, and staggered the big man back with a blow to the chin. He jerked the door open, paused to say, "Mark, you come through the doorway and I'll throw lead at you, sure!"

He backed out into the darkness, mounted Barron's horse and headed for the Gap. . . .

At dawn Pete was deep in the badlands. The barren, rocky wastelands stretched out endlessly all about him.

Pete, while drifting in his saddlebum days, had ridden the Badlands. He remembered a hidden canyon sheltered by towering rock walls. A cattle drive could travel only so far—then horses, men and cow critters had to rest. That canyon

seemed a likely place to hole up in.

He reached the hidden entrance to the canyon in the fading light just after sundown. The entrance was behind a jutting formation of rock, concealed from casual eyes, and was but a natural tunnel in a rock wall. Pete rode through the short tunnel, his gun in hand and a jumpiness in him that he couldn't quiet down. He emerged into a long and narrow canyon. It was so narrow that the herd of cattle corralled there seemed to fill it.

Pete swung in among some tall rocks and dismounted. He waited until darkness closed down, then moved silently along the canyon wall. The cattle, driven hard and needing grass, were restless. Suddenly it occurred to Pete that they might easily be spooked into a stampede. He saw four men beyond the herd, squatted down by a small fire. The smell of coffee filled the air and drew a tight knot in Pete's stomach. He moved forward, gun ready.

He was within thirty feet of the campfire when a gun muzzle was jabbed into his back. A voice said, "Don't try it, kid."

Mark Barron's voice.

The men by the fire roused up. The bulky Sam Harbin growled, "Hell if we ain't got company!"

For one brief instant Pete hesitated, on the verge of cutting loose with his sixgun. But Barron's gun pressed against his back and he knew that he would die if he cocked his own weapon. The four outlaws crowded up, their guns drawn. Pete let his six-shooter drop to the ground.

"What's this, Barron?" Harbin demanded. His face was heavy-joweled and his eyes had a chill metallic glint. "Who's this breed?"

"Just a locoed kid from the Sixty-six," Barron said. "He trailed you hombres, and I trailed him. Lucky I got here just now. You might've had to kill him, Sam."

"Might've?" Harbin muttered. "It looks like I got to. Can't let him ride out of here and tell about this hidden canyon. You sure he's alone, Barron?"

"Didn't see nobody else," Barron told him. Then: "Sam, that coffee sure smells good. Me, I ain't ate since yesterday." He gave Pete a shove toward the campfire, followed him to it. He reached for the coffee pot and a tin cup. He whispered to Pete, "Watch it, kid!"

PETE gave a start. His heart lifted. He was going to die here, but Mark Barron was going to side him. That made it easier.

The four outlaws crowded up, their manner wary. Sam Harbin watched Mark Barron with sudden suspicion, but the 66's big ramrod was innocently pouring coffee into the tin cup.

"Barron, I got a hunch you're sidin' this breed."

"Me, Sam? Don't be loco."

"We'll see," Harbin said. "Runt, take the kid off somewhere and fix him."

Pete froze. The outlaw called Runt, stepped up to him and jabbed him in the side with his gun. Harbin and the other two hard-cases stepped back, their guns and their eyes on Mark Barron. There was a sudden empty silence. Barron set down the coffee pot. He raised the cup toward his lips.

Runt shoved his gun against Pete again, and Pete turned and took a step away from the fire. It happened then. Sam Harbin bellowed with pain as the hot coffee from Barron's cup was flung in his face. Pete heard Barron yell:

"Now, Pete—now!"

A shot crashed—and a man screamed. Pete swung about to Runt, who had looked over his shoulder when Harbin's cry sounded, and wrenched the gun from the outlaw's hand. He struck Runt down, swung the gun up again. The others had jumped away from the light of the fire.

Pete ran through the darkness, coming up by the cattle. Behind him gunfire broke out. He turned and saw that one gun was firing from behind some rocks. Three outlaw guns were returning the fire from shifting positions. Pete realized that Harbin meant to kill Barron first, thinking him the most dangerous—then the wild bunch would hunt down Pete Saba.

The longhorns were milling a little, some bawling. Abruptly Pete knew that the herd might save him and Mark Barron. He started running, ripping off his shirt, and on the far side of the herd he searched frantically for a few tufts of dry dead bunch grass. He grabbed up a few handfuls and wrapped the straw into the shirt. He struck a match and ignited the stuffed shirt, making a torch of it. Across the canyon, the guns were still crashing.

Pete drew his own gun and fired three quick shots into the air. He yelped like an Apache, waved his flaming shirt at the cattle. The herd milled, slowly at first, then faster and faster, until finally it broke and ran—headed away from Pete's flaming torch.

Two hundred head of fear-crazed longhorns stampeded through that narrow canyon. The thunder of pounding hoofs rumbled angrily. Men shouted up ahead, fired their guns into the charging cattle, but there was no halting that tidal wave of hoofs and vicious horns. The Harbin wild bunch went down screaming.

The noise of the stampede rumbled in the distance. Pete ran toward the rocks where Mark Barron's gun had fired from. He shouted, "Mark, it's me—Pete!"

Barron came from the rocks looking shaken. He gripped Pete's arm.

A gunshot sounded behind Pete, and Mark Barron slumped down. Pete whirled and saw a bloody and torn Sam Harbin coming at him. The outlaw fired again, but Pete was moving rapidly, a shifting target. Pete fired at the stumbling outlaw. Harbin grunted and took another wobbly step, then collapsed. Pete looked about but the other hard-cases were still heaps on the ground.

He knelt by Mark Barron, and he saw at once that the big man was dying. He bent down and said, "Mark, I'm plumb glad you changed over and came to help me stamp out this wild bunch."

Barron's hand closed on his arm. He coughed rackingly. "Didn't—change over—Pete," he gasped. "Came to save—you." There was reddish foam on his lips, but they managed a faint smile. "Took a fancy to you, younker—like to a son."

"But I'm only a breed!" Pete muttered.

But Mark Barron hadn't heard. He had sighed heavily and now he lay still.

Young Pete Saba wiped away unashamed tears. He would get his horse and Mark Barron's horse, and he would place his friend's body over the saddle. He would mount and ride back to the 66, and he would face Chris Hayden and Ike Harlon and the rest of the crew. He would tell where the Harbin wild bunch and the stolen 66 cattle could be found.

And he would say, "Me and Mark, we did some real fightin' for the old 66!"

THE FIGHTING HAS-BEEN

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER



Barney's fists were doing more damage than his scattergun. . . .

Of what earthly use were Shotgun-guard Barney's newly acquired virtues—of being a quiet married man who never touched a drop of red-eye and who never cussed—when he looked into the business end of a hard-case bandit's sixgun? . . . Well, even Barney, himself, was dumb-founded at the answer!

BARNEY TUCKER was a famous man in the Blue Mountain country. He was a stage guard and a good one. For years he'd ridden the stage that Buckskin Hodge drove between Zero and the Lucky Cuss mine, and he'd never lost a dollar, but he had a far greater claim to fame than that. He maintained he possessed the biggest feet in the Blue Mountains, and there was none to dispute his claim.

There had been a time before Barney was married when he bragged he could out-drink, out-cuss, out-eat, and out-fight

any man between the Rockies and the Cascades. But now the folks around Zero said degenerate days had set in for Barney Tucker. He'd sure gone downhill, they said. He didn't make any of those brags now. He just contended that he had the biggest feet in the country, and let it go at that.

It wasn't that Barney couldn't still hold up his end in any kind of a contest. He was considerable man, was Barney Tucker. Six feet and a half tall, and he'd weigh close to two hundred and fifty when he was hungry. All good bone and hard muscle. No, it was simply a matter of Barney losing interest in the good things of life.

There were two things that accounted for Barney's degeneracy. One was the stage-guard job. It was a trust, according to Barney's way of thinking. And when a man is given a trust, if he is any great shakes of a man, he forthwith leads a sober and upright life instead of taking on a snootful of tanglefoot as Buckskin Hodge did every time he landed back in Zero.

The second factor that had to do with Barney's reformation was the acquiring of his wife, Sibylla, and little Sibylla who was a small carbon copy of her mother. It was always a constant wonder and delight to Barney that a good cook like Sibylla had ever taken him for a husband, and an even bigger wonder and delight that he was father of a cute little trick like the pint-sized Sibylla.

Barney was also right proud of the fact that there never had been a successful holdup when he'd been sitting in the box. Folks figured maybe it was because of Barney's past reputation which clung to him despite his reformation.

But sooner or later trouble was bound to roost on Barney's big shoulders. And it did on the day that Mrs. Caxton decided to go to the mine. It was the day, too, that the Wells Fargo box contained the payroll.

Barney had just boosted the heavy box under the seat when Mrs. Caxton appeared. She hadn't lived in Zero long, and she was something of a mystery. Her husband was even more of a mystery. He rode a black horse, had a couple of pals who looked to Barney like tough hands,

and he packed his gun thonged low in the manner of a professional gunslick. He and his friends spent most of their time riding in the mountains instead of staying in Zero and working as men should. All this was in Barney's mind as the stage moved out of Zero with Mrs. Caxton in the seat between him and Buckskin.

"Sure glad to have you along, ma'm," Buckskin said. "Whenever there's just us two up here, Barney gets plumb gabby about what a fine life he is leading. He preaches all the way to the mine. Gets kind o' monotonous after awhile."

Mrs. Caxton smiled. "Won't he preach now that I'm along?"

"Nope, and I'm mighty thankful. You see, Barney's kind o' bashful. Being this close to a woman makes him plumb tongue-tied. How he ever got up spunk enough to pop the question to Sibylla is more'n I know."

Mrs. Caxton smiled again, and said nothing.

Barney never had heard her talk before. She was a big woman, and her voice sounded strangely high. Sibylla had called on her once, and Barney was remembering Sibylla had said Mrs. Caxton hadn't even invited her into the house, a horrible breach of etiquette which was unheard of in Zero.

"He ain't just willing to be worthless himself," Buckskin went on. "He's getting to be one of these hyar danged reformers. Howsomever, Barney wastes his wind on me."

Again Mrs. Caxton smiled, and said nothing. It was a cold fall day. She had her head wrapped so only her eyes and nose showed, and she kept her hands inside her heavy coat.

Barney saw all that, thought of the payroll in the Wells-Fargo box, and of Mrs. Caxton's tough husband and his pals. He took a firmer grip on the shotgun between his legs, and carefully scanned every clump of sagebrush as they toiled up Seven Mile Hill.

Barney had sensed trouble from the moment they'd left Zero, but he wasn't prepared for what happened when Buckskin started to cuss—and pointed to a boulder lying in the road ahead of them.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Buckskin apologized. "I'm not used to having a purty

woman like you for a passenger. Just look at that danged rock sitting there in the middle of the road. Dunno if I can get around it or not. . . . Barney, mebber you'd better get out and give it a heave."

But Barney didn't move. He was studying the bank above the road. Judging from the ragged gash in the bank, the boulder had recently rolled to its present resting place, and it certainly hadn't started under its own power.

"Git out, Barney," Buckskin shouted. "You're getting lazy along with being so danged righteous."

Mrs. Caxton had removed a hand from inside her coat, and laid something on Barney's knee.

"Do you know what that is, Barney?" she asked, and put her hand inside her coat again.



BARNEY took a look, and froze. Mrs. Caxton had placed little Sibylla's wool cap on his knee. This time Mrs. Caxton removed both her hands from her coat. She was holding a deringer in each one, and the muzzles were poked sharply into Barney's and Buckskin's ribs.

"These derringers make a wicked hole when they go off, boys," she said. Her voice wasn't high now, but hard and heavy. "Just sit tight, and you don't get hurt. Otherwise there'll be a driver and guard job open."

Timed to the second with her words was the appearance of three men above the bank. They slid down to the road, their long-barreled Colts covering Barney and Buckskin. They were wearing blue jumpers and they had their faces covered with bandannas, so there wasn't much by which Barney could identify them. He had a hunch, though, the tall man was Mrs. Caxton's husband.

"In case you feel like getting tough, Barney," Mrs. Caxton said harshly, "you might like to know how I got that cap. We're holding your daughter and wife prisoner. They're tied up now, but if we get back to the cabin all right—we'll let them go and nobody gets hurt. If you make trouble, we'll take it out of the hide of your wife and kid. How about it?"

Buckskin groaned and spat over the wheel. "Let 'em have that payroll. It ain't nothing out of our pockets."

But Barney was thinking about the trust he held, and the fact he'd never lost a dollar. Then he thought about Sibylla and little Sibylla—and his face tightened. Slowly he nodded.

"That's better," Mrs. Caxton said. "I thought you'd be smart. If you're as tough a fighter as they say you are, you might get the best of all four of us. But if you did, you'd never find your wife and girl. It's too big a country even for a man with feet as big as yours."

"You gonna sit up there and gab all day, Bill?" the tall outlaw asked.

"Heave the box out, Barney," Mrs. Caxton ordered.

Barney heaved.

"All right, Joe," Mrs. Caxton called. "You gents get that rock out of the road, and we'll let 'em go on."

The three outlaws tried to roll the boulder off the road. But after a varied assortment of curses and grunts, the boulder remained where it was.

"Can't budge it, Bill," the tall outlaw said. "We had some pries under it when we rolled it down."

"I'll get it," Barney said, and climbed down.

"Keep him covered, Joe," Mrs. Caxton said worriedly.

"I'll plug him if he makes a move," the tall outlaw promised.

Barney put his great hands under the boulder, lifted the side next to him and rolled it over. It reached the edge of the road, hung there an instant and then plunged down the mountain side with a thunderous avalanche of accompanying gravel and dirt.

Mrs. Caxton was on the ground now standing beside the other three. They stared wide-eyed at Barney. The tall outlaw shook his head, and muttered, "And three of us couldn't budge the damned thing."

Mrs. Caxton took off her coat and stripped a wig from her head. Then she stepped out of her dress.

"A man," Buckskin blurted. "Hell's bells. It wasn't no female at all. It's a sure-enough man!"

It was a man all right with a .45 hang-

ing in a holster tied-down on his hip. "Git up there, Barney," the erstwhile Mrs. Caxton said. "Git them nags to moving, Buckskin. And don't forget about your wife and kid, Barney."

Barney climbed up to the seat. Buckskin spoke to his horses. A moment later the stage was around a turn in the road, and out of sight of the outlaws.

"That's the first time we was ever held up on this road," Buckskin groaned. "And to think that woman wasn't no woman at all. Just a lowdown, sneaking varmint pretending he was a woman and pulling them derringers on us."

Barney didn't say a word. Nor did he until the coach reached the summit. Then he began to swear. Afterwards Buckskin said he'd never heard prettier cussing in his life.

"Yessir," Buckskin avowed, "I thought I knowed 'em all—but hell, I'm just an amachoor."

When the cussing stopped, Barney roared, "I'm getting down, Buckskin. You go on to the mine alone. I ain't never lost a nickel, and I ain't gonna lose that payroll. You can tell Hagen that when you get to the mine. And tell him not to ship no gold back till I round them hellions up."

"Let the sheriff chase 'em down," Buckskin begged. "You can't match four of 'em. The sheriff'll get a posse and run 'em up a tree."

Apparently Barney didn't hear. He stepped to the ground and started down the grade.

"You ain't got nothing but a big pair of feet," Buckskin yelled after him. "Takes more'n feet to catch up with slick gents like them. They'll murder Sibylla and little Sibylla. Don't be a danged fool!"



BARNEY kept going, and didn't look back. When he reached the scene of the holdup, he found the express box open and empty. For a time he stood studying the tracks. He examined the discarded feminine apparel, but he found no shoes. "Mrs. Caxton" had been wearing a pair of women's shoes, and apparently was still wearing them.

Barney climbed the bank, and followed

the tracks to a clump of jackpines where the outlaws had left their horses. Here Barney stopped and considered. If the outlaws had left the country, he had no chance to catch them on foot, but he had a hunch they didn't plan to leave the country. They had been hanging around Zero for a month or more, and they'd spent that month scouting. Apparently they knew when the payroll left Zero, and it was likely they knew a shipment of gold was due to leave the mine. The way Barney figured it they'd hide out, and tackle the stage again. They'd put too much time and planning into this job to be satisfied with only the payroll.

Barney followed the horses' tracks to the top of the mountain, and down the other side. Several times he lost the trail, but he picked it up again. From the first he'd guessed they would head for the cabin of an old prospector named Alec Dean. The farther Barney went the surer he was that he'd guessed right. The weather was too cold for camping out, and Dean's cabin was the only one in that part of the country.

When Barney reached Elk Creek in the bottom of the canyon he lost the trail, and was unable to pick it up again. Probably the outlaws had followed the stream bed. It would be hard to tell how far they'd gone before they'd left it. Eventually Barney could have found it, but it would take most of the afternoon. He wanted to reach Dean's cabin before dark. Crossing the creek, he climbed the opposite side of the canyon and followed the ridge until he came to the cross canyon that held the prospector's shack.

Here Barney paused, studying the cabin below him. A thin column of smoke rose from the chimney. The pole corral behind the cabin held Dean's paint horse. There was absolutely nothing to indicate that the outlaws had holed up in the cabin, but Barney was still certain he'd guessed right. He dropped down the steep slope, keeping out of sight of the cabin and belied forward behind an upthrust of rock until he was almost to the front door. Then he rose, and strode straight to the cabin.

Barney made it to the cabin in six long steps, his shotgun held ready for a blast the instant anything looked wrong. He

didn't knock but shoved the door open and went in fast.

Old Alec was frying bacon. He wheeled towards the door when he heard Barney, and grabbed for his gun. Then he saw who it was.

"Doggone your mangy hide!" Alec bawled. "Why don't you knock when you come in? What's the idea of slamming into a man's home, and packing a shotgun like you was ready to blow his head off? Just 'cause you got the biggest feet in the mountains don't give you no rights like that. I got a notion to slap this bacon grease all over your ugly mug."

Any other time Barney would have laughed. Old Alec looked like an infuriated tomat. His green eyes were glassy with anger, and his scraggly white whiskers stuck out all over his face. But Barney Tucker didn't laugh. He thought he'd reached the end of the trail, and he'd barged in ready to take on all four of the outlaws at once. Now there were no outlaws here. Only old Alec Dean, breathing fire and brimstone, one hand still on his gun-butt.

Barney heeled the door shut and crossed to the stove.

"Cool down, Alec," Barney said. "I'm looking for a bunch of owlhooters that held up the stage. I figured they'd moved in on you."

"Ain't seen no owlhooters," Alec said promptly. "Ain't seen nobody for a month. You can take that scattergun of your'n, and hike out of here. I'm still man enough to handle any skunks that move in on me."

"Reckon I'll stay awhile," Barney said, and kept his shotgun ready for instant use. Something was wrong here but he couldn't put his fingers on it yet.

"You ain't gonna clean my grub out," Alec shrilled. "I've heerd too much about how you used to out-drink and out-eat everybody in Zero. I've got enough bacon

and beans to get me through the winter, but you'd eat it up at one meal. You go on now, Barney Tucker. Get them big feet of your'n to moving."

Barney was studying the cabin while Alec was talking. There wasn't much furniture. One chair, a table, a stove and some shelves filled with sacks and cans of food. A bunk had been built in one corner. That was all—and none of it could hide four outlaws.

There was a door in the back wall. It stood open a crack, and Barney remembered seeing a lean-to built against that wall. Then Barney saw the pair of shoes carelessly tossed in a corner. Women's shoes!

The outlaws were in the lean-to. The shoes were all the proof he needed. Barney looked at the angry old prospector, and he wasn't sure how the man stood. He might have thrown in with the outlaws, or he might be scared. Either way he was dangerous.

"Well, are you going?" Alec snarled.

Barney moved around Alec to the back wall. He sniffed. "That bacon smells good. I'm sure hungry. Builds up a man's appetite hiking around over these hills, 'specially when you're packing feet as big as mine. Better fork that out, Alec, and put in some more."

"Like hell I will!" Alec howled. "I'm gonna eat this bacon. You vamoze."

Barney reached out and lifted Alec's gun from its holster. He shoved it into his waistband. "You wouldn't send me off hungry, would you, Alec?"

"I sure would," Alec grated. "I ain't got enough bacon in this cabin to fill up your big belly."

Barney slid back of the stove. There were four men behind the lean-to door, and they'd have their guns out. He was going into a hail of lead, but he didn't know what else he could do. He reached the door, jerked it open, and let go both

**You can put another nail in Tojo's coffin
by buying War Bonds!**

barrels of the shotgun. Then he followed the buckshot in a wild, fist-swinging leap.



HE WAS never sure afterwards exactly what happened. Guns roared. He felt the flame and the lead, the gun thunder close enough to his head to shatter his ear drums. They were all over him, clubbed guns smashing at his head and shoulders. Barney's great fist connected with a man's face, and that man was out of the fight. He was on his back then, and in the dim light he saw a man leveling a gun at him. One big foot came up, caught the man's wrist, and sent the Colt spinning.

Barney got to his feet, caught two men by the coat collars, and jammed their heads together with a skull-smashing crack. That was all for them. A gun blazed in front of him, but the slug didn't stop Barney. He grabbed the outlaw by the neck, twisted until he heard a snap, and let the limp form go. Then Barney Tucker stumbled out of the lean-to, oozing blood from half a dozen bullet holes. A gun barrel had laid his scalp back, and his face was a crimson mask.

"You ain't alive!" old Alec cried. "Jumping bulltoads, man, you couldn't be alive!"

"I ain't hurt," Barney said, and spit out a mouthful of blood. "Just got a few scratches, but I had to be a mite rough with them fellers. You'd better have a look."

Alec had a look, and came out of the lean-to shaking his head.

"You missed with that scattergun," Alec reported. "I reckon they was hunkered down, and you shot over their heads. But what you did with your hands is something awful. One of 'em has got a broken neck, and two of 'em got their heads smashed in. One of 'em is still alive—but I reckon he won't make no trouble for a spell. You better let me get them holes of your'n patched up."

"Go ahead," Barney answered, "and then get some more bacon fried. I'm sure hungry."

"The one that's alive is the jigger who walked in on them female shoes," Alec said while he did what he could for Bar-

ney's wounds. "He was sure cussing because the rest of 'em forgot to bring his boots. They was figgering on hiding here till they could tackle the stage again. Three of 'em rode through here a week or so ago claiming they was looking for lost cattle. I reckon they was just getting the lay of the land. Anyhow, they showed up a couple of hours before you did, and told me I was feeding 'em for a spell. Hell, Barney, I couldn't do nothing about it."

"Sure," Barney agreed. "How about that bacon?"

"One of 'em spotted you when you was coming down the mountain," Alec went on as he sliced bacon. "They didn't want to get no murder charge agin 'em, so they hid back there, and told me to get rid of you. That door was open a crack, and they had a bead on me all the time. Damn it, Barney, I tried to get rid of you, but you wouldn't go."

"Sure, Alec," Barney said. "Hurry up with that bacon. I'm powerful hungry. Then we'll take that jigger who's still kicking back to town along with the payroll—and mebbe Sibylla can cook me up a real meal. Come to think of it, I never was so hungry."



Buckskin Hodge had just driven the stage back into Zero, and was bellied up against the bar in the Blue Bucket Saloon when Alec Dean came in. Buckskin and most of the rest of Zero's male population listened pop-eyed to Alec's recital of what had happened in his cabin.

"Where's that big-footed fighting fool?" Buckskin demanded when Alec was done.

"Reckon he's getting the doc to patch him up," Alec said. "We took that female, shoe-wearing hombre to the calaboose. Then Barney set out to look for the doc."

"Doc ain't in town," the barkeep said. "You reckon Barney was hurt bad?"

"Nope," Barney said as he came through the batwings. "Just a few scratches. Hey," he looked at Buckskin, "what are you doing here? You ain't supposed to come back till tomorrow."

"I know it." Buckskin grinned. "Hagen allowed you wouldn't get that dinero back, and he sent me home to get

another payroll. He said I'd better pick up an army this time, seeing as you wasn't no good."

"No good!" Barney roared. He picked up a bottle, and took a long drink. Then he looked at it, and slowly shook his head. "Buckskin, the devil is in that stuff. You lap it up like a cat drinks cream. You gotta quit it." He threw the empty bottle across the room. "When I get my fists on that Lew Hagen, I'll make him eat them words." Barney started for the door.

"Hey," Buckskin called. "There's one thing been worrying me. How come you decided to go after them hombres when you figgered they had Sibylla and little Sibylla?"

Barney stopped, and turned back to face the men at the bar. "If anybody says anything against my Sibylla I'll tear 'em apart."

Nobody stirred.

Barney nodded. "All right then, I'll tell you. Sibylla is a mite fussy. When she says anything, she means it. I didn't think about it right then when that hombre shoved little Sibylla's cap at me. I knew trouble was coming, and I was too worried about trying to head it off to think right straight.

"Afterwards, when we got up on top I remembered Sibylla got little Sibylla's winter clothes out, and then decided it was too early to put 'em on. Once Sibylla de-

cided that, she wouldn't have changed her mind if hell rose up and froze over. So after I figgered a minute, I knew one of them devils had got into the house, and stolen that cap just to make me think they had captured Sibylla and little Sibylla."

Barney started for the door, and stopped. He turned back to face the men. "If any of you yahoos tell Sibylla I had a drink of tanglefoot, I'll not only tear your gizzard out, but I'll cut your heart up and make sausage out of it. And, Buckskin, if you tell her you heard me cuss this morning, I'll—"

"I won't breathe a word," Buckskin said quickly. "So help me, Barney, I'll carry your secret to the grave."

"You'd better, or you'll be in a grave right soon." Then Barney went out.

"There goes a fighting man with a fighting heart big as his feet," Alec said.

"Yeah," Buckskin agreed, "but he keeps telling me I oughtta get married. I don't savvy that. You know, I think Sibylla is the one that really runs things on that roost."

"Could be," the barkeep agreed, "but I wouldn't want to be in her shoes either. She'll be cooking all night."

Buckskin poured himself a drink, and stared at it judiciously. "You know, boys, it's sure too bad Barney got married. He was an awful good man afore he hooked up with Sibylla."

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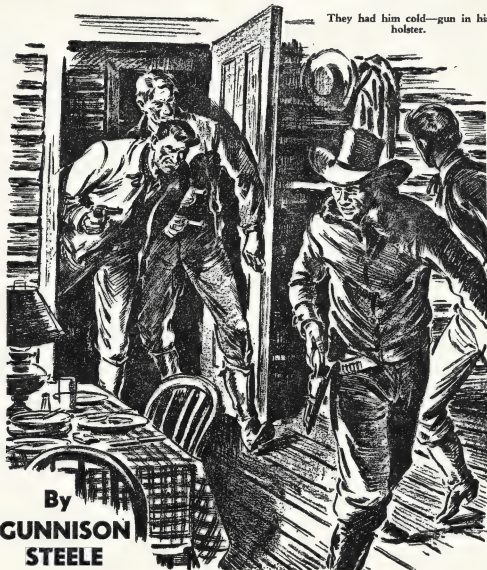
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Pay Day For The Pistoleers

They had him cold—gun in his holster.



By
**GUNNISON
STEELE**

Goaded by outlaw guns, Johnny Parr had to make the split-second choice of burying a page of his lawless past under the bullet-riddled body of his lawman friend—or of looking at his cherished range from behind penitentiary bars!

THE wind came down off the tablelands like a pack of monstrous white wolves, snarling and wailing, driving a shroud of snow and sleet before it. It clawed and hammered fiercely at Johnny Parr's stout cabin there on Beaver Creek.

Inside the cabin it was warm and comfortable. But lanky, dark-haired Johnny Parr, looking out a window, suddenly felt

like the blizzard's bleakness had forced its way into the cabin and crept into his blood. Two riders were crossing the frozen-over creek below the cabin. Their sheepskin collars were pulled high, their heads lowered against the fury of wind and sleet, but Johnny recognized them instantly.

Their names were "Rio Red" Peaks and Owl Drue. They both were killers, and the last men Johnny Parr wanted to see. They were the only men alive who knew that Johnny had once ridden outside the law for a brief period.

The two riders came up from the creek and passed the cabin, not even glancing at it, and rode on to the barn. Johnny grimaced distastefully, left the window and sat down in a chair. They weren't afraid of what he might do; they knew they had him cold. This wasn't the first time during the last two years that they'd come to his ranch and demanded shelter, from both the weather and the law.

That first time they'd stopped here, two years ago, they'd demanded a couple of horses to make their getaway on. In exchange, they'd promised never to bother him again. But they'd come again and again.

He felt an anger-born impulse to hold his gun on the two when they came into the cabin, take them to Silver Bow and turn them over to Sheriff Sam Clayburn. But that would likely mean the pen for himself. They could *prove* Johnny had ridden outside the law, and they would do it if they were caught.

The door opened. Rio Red and Owl Drue came into the room without bothering to knock. They shook snow from their clothes and faces, looking warily about the shadowy room. Rio Red was a blocky, hawk-faced hombre with bristly red hair; Drue was lanky, dark, with bulging, unwinking eyes. They looked finally at Johnny Parr, grinning.

Rio Red said: "Howdy, Johnny—long time no see!"

"Not long enough to suit me," Johnny said bluntly. "What you two want here?"

"Why, just a place to get out of this hellish blizzard for a while. You here alone?"

"Alone," said Johnny. Then he added sarcastically, "Make yourselves at home."

"We aim to."

The two renegades took off their heavy coats and held out their numbed hands to the stove.

"We're hungry," Rio Red said. "And in a hurry. We've already grained our brones. While we wait, kid, you fix us some grub."

Johnny grunted, "Fix your own grub!"

Cruelty stirred in Owl Drue's bulging eyes. "You'll fix it—and like it! You'll crawl on your belly, like you did the last time we was here. Because you know what'll happen if you don't!"

Johnny's temper flared, but he crowded back the fierce words that rose to his lips. He could gain nothing by quarreling with these two. His one thought was to be rid of them as soon as possible. He got up and started rummaging in a cupboard. Rio Red watched him, back to the stove, while Drue went to the window and stared out into the storm.



JOHNNY PARR had first met these two over three years ago, down in his native Texas, when he was little more than a kid. He'd been pretty wild, looking for excitement, and it hadn't been too hard for the two to get him drunk and talk him into robbing a stage. Later, cold sober, realization of what he'd done had left him dazed. To make it worse, Rio Red had shot the stage driver.

The law didn't know young Johnny Parr was mixed up in the robbery. Nobody knew it—except Rio Red and Owl Drue. And they'd used the knowledge to drag him on down the owlhoot trails. But, finally, he'd told them he was through. He'd held his gun on them, disarmed them, then ridden away fast. Heart-sick and a little panicky, he'd ridden far and fast, stopping at last here in Montana and filing on a few fertile acres along Beaver Creek.

He'd thought he was free of Rio Red and Owl Drue. But Texas had got too hot for them and, ironically, they'd found Johnny by accident here in Montana.

Johnny glanced at Owl Drue at the window and asked, "You gents expectin' somebody?"

"A sheriff's posse is all," growled Rio Red. "They can't trail us in this blizzard, but they'll know we got to have shelter. Sheriff Clayburn knows we're in this neck of the woods, too."

"What happened?"

The Lank-faced Rio Red said casually, "We stuck up a bank over in Red Butte three days ago. There was some shootin', and my bronc got a bullet. We'd have got clean away if we hadn't had to stop at a ranch for fresh hosses yesterday. We had to kill the rancher, but his kid got away and spread the alarm. They know we headed in this direction."

Johnny Parr was frying beef steak. He said, "You two eat and get out of here!"

"We'll get out when we get damn good and ready! You was mixed just as deep as me and Owl in that stage robbery down in Texas. There was a killin' *that* time, don't forget that."

"I'm not forgettin' anything."

"Then shut up—and hurry with that grub! And if any lawdogs happen by you better lie like a hoss thief, if you know what's good for you!"

Johnny said nothing else. He was in a tight spot and he knew it. He couldn't kick the two killers out, and he couldn't afford to let them be found here. Sheriff Sam Clayburn was his friend. Folks on this Silver Bow range didn't suspect that he'd ever been anything but square and honest.

He placed the finished meal on the table before them, and watched as they ate wolfishly. The two had been drinking from a whiskey bottle ever since their arrival, and they were getting boisterous.

"Thought you was too good to trail with us, huh, kid?" Rio Red sneered. "Well, you ain't too good to crawl on your belly like a dog and wait on us. Bring me some more cawfee, pronto!"

Johnny obeyed, and stayed quiet. It was late afternoon; the grayish shroud was deepening outside, tormented by the howling wind and the driving snow and sleet. It was bitterly cold.

Darkness had fallen, so they didn't see the lone rider as he came up and stopped before the cabin. They didn't know he was there until he knocked on the cabin door.

The killers got very still. Rio Red

growled at Johnny, "Who's that, kid?"

Johnny shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. I told you to eat and get out of here. What you aim to do now?"

"I'll show you." The outlaws were on their feet, guns in hand. "Mebby that's some puncher huntin' shelter from the storm—and mebbly it's a lawdog. Whoever it is, you keep your mouth shut, and get rid of him pronto! Me and Owl are goin' into that side room there. But we'll leave a crack in the door, and we'll have our guns lined on whoever that is. You make a crooked play and we'll cut him down—and you, too!"

The two killers went into the tiny side room, leaving the door slightly ajar. The knocking sounded on the front door again. Feeling tight and cold inside, Johnny Parr went to the door and opened it.

A wiry oldest, swathed in a great sheepskin coat, came into the room. Snow and sleet clung to his coat and to his gray handlebar mustaches. Sheriff Sam Clayburn glanced sharply about the room, then at Johnny Parr. His smile was friendly.

"Howdy, Johnny. Devilish cold outside, and gettin' colder."

"Bad night to be ridin'."

"A sheriff ain't got no more rights than a hound dawg," the runty lawman grumbled. "Rain or shine or snow, makes no difference."

"You trailin' somebody?"

"Might call it that." The sheriff unbuttoned his coat and stood with gnarled hands out-stretched to the stove. "Couple of bad ones named Rio Red and Owl Drue. Robbed a bank up at the Butte three days ago. I know they're not far off, because they stopped at Jim Tabor's place yesterday. They killed him and tried to kill his kid, but the button got away. One of the worst things I ever heard of. Don't reckon you've seen them?"

The words almost gagged Johnny, but he said, "Why, no. I ain't seen a soul for two days."

♦ ♦ ♦

CLAYBURN sighed. "They'll have to hole up; they can't live out in this blizzard. I figure they'll stop at some little outfit, throw their guns on

whoever's there and take over till the blizzard lets up enough for them to ride."

They talked on awhile.

Finally the sheriff said, "Well, I'll ride on to Edd Gort's place. Mebby a wild goose chase, but a man can't just stay still. So long, kid." He started toward the door.

But suddenly the door to the side room burst open, and the two Texas killers leaped through. Rio Red yelled, "Just a minute, tin-star—you ain't goin' anywhere."

Sheriff Clayburn whirled, surprise touching his bony face. He started to grab for his gun, saw that they had him cold, and got very still. He didn't look at Johnny.

Johnny hadn't moved from his position near the stove. He was a little dazed by what was happening.

"Pretty slick," Rio Red jeered. "Thought you had us fooled, didn't you? You knew we was there in that room."

"That's right," the sheriff said calmly. "I saw the plates you'd eaten from. I figured you'd be there, and that you'd have guns lined on me. I couldn't get at you. I figured I'd pretend to leave, then sneak back and throw down on you."

"Only it didn't work out that way. You know what happens next?"

"Don't reckon such smelly skunks as you two'd let another killin' stand in your way, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean!" said Rio Red. "Owl, you take him outside—and don't bring him back!"

Owl Drue stepped forward and prodded the sheriff's thin stomach with his gun-muzzle. "Start walkin', lawdog!"

Clayburn turned slowly, and in turning his calm gaze touched Johnny Parr. There was no fear in his eyes, no anger, only a slight puzzlement. That puzzlement seemed to slap at Johnny.

Johnny didn't mean to speak—didn't mean to grab for his gun. But he heard himself say, "Hold up! You're not takin' the sheriff anywhere. . . . You're turnin' him loose!"

For five seconds the room was very still and quiet. The sheriff and Drue stopped.

Rio Red turned slowly, surprise in his

pale eyes as he looked at Johnny Parr, at the gun in his hand. "You gone loco, kid? Didn't I tell you—"

"Drop your guns," Johnny ordered. "I know what I'm doin'. Drop 'em!"

Rio Red's gun blazed suddenly, and Johnny felt the bullet sear across his throat. His own gun spouted redly. Rio Red yelled, slapping at his side. Sheriff Clayburn flung his shoulder into Owl Drue's stomach, then jumped back, ramming a hand down into his boot to grab the slender .38 pistol that was cached there.

Then the room exploded in a savage burst of gunfire that roared above the sounds of the storm. Thrown off-balance by the sudden turn of events, the two killers became rattled. But Johnny Parr and the runty sheriff weren't rattled. They fought with deadly deliberateness, knowing it was kill or be killed.

The gunfire stopped as suddenly as it had begun—and the two Texas killers lay dead on the floor.

"Just as well," Sheriff Clayburn said a while later. "It saves the State the expense of hangin' them. It took nerve, kid, to make your play when them two snakes already had their guns out. It saved my life."

Johnny said slowly, "I had to do it. And there's somethin' I've got to tell you. I knowed them two was there in that room."

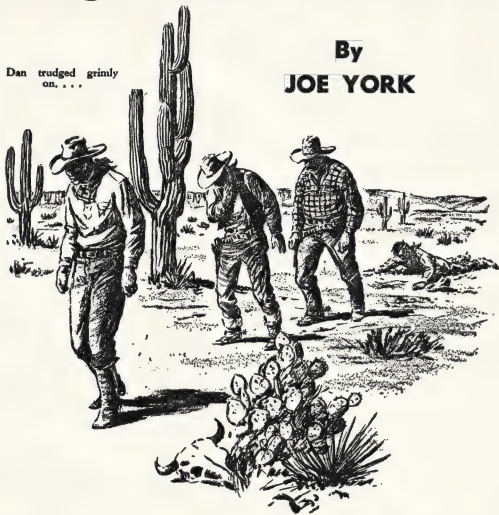
"'Course you knowed it," Sam Clayburn said swiftly, and in his old eyes there was a world of knowledge—knowledge of youth's wildness and recklessness, and the trouble it leads to. "Remember, I said I figured they'd show up at some little outfit, throw their guns on whoever was there and take over. That's what they done here. They had you cold, and wasn't a thing you could do. But when the last chip was in the pot, you come through like I allus figured you would. Unless you say different, I'll figure that's the way it happened—for it's a dead cinch these two won't ever do any talkin'!"

Johnny Parr was quiet for a moment, and in the quietness he could hear the wolflike snarling of the blizzard outside. But now it was a comforting sound, warm and filled with hope.

King of the Wasteland

Dan trudged grimly
on. . .

By
JOE YORK



Staking his fabulously rich gold mine on a thousand-to-one vengeance gamble, Dan Travis led three ruthless killers into the scorching wastelands—which would be his victory ground or blistering coffin!



THE night he rode in from the desert, Dan Travis stopped first at Lanassa's boothill. He stood hat in hand by a month-old grave and swore that he would avenge the murder of Old Sam Grier who lay there. And yet, an hour later, it seemed that the youngster had forgotten his oath.

Dan acted like any other man reaching a boomtown after striking it rich, having himself a wild spree. He was unsteady on his feet by the time he reached the Star Palace, Lanassa's biggest and rowdiest honkatank, and he had been sqandering

paydirt like water in flood time. Word of his celebrating had preceded him, and when the batwing doors swung closed behind him a sudden hush fell over the big barroom.

The play at the gambling tables faltered, men bellied up at the bar nudged one another and faced about. The girls primped and put on their artificial smiles. Tin horns and hard-cases showed a professional interest.

"It's him!" somebody stage-whispered. "The kid with the Horse-Shoe Mine!"

Dan was only vaguely aware of the excitement his entrance caused. He made his way through the crowd, staggering a little, and came up to the bar. Bellied up, he pushed his sombrero back off his forehead. He had a clean-cut young face and a pair of metallic gray eyes—which were not whiskey dulled at all.

"Will this get me a drink?" He lay a piece of gold-veined quartz on the bar.

The bartender reached out a pudgy finger and rolled the nugget about. "That will get you a full bottle, stranger." The barman set out a bottle and a glass.

The crowd was watching. Men gaped. One muttered, "Look at the size of that high-grade!" The bartender let the nugget be handled. It passed from hand to hand along the length of the bar.

Dan Travis tilted the bottle and filled his glass. He grinned slyly. "Plenty more where that came from!"

A furtive-eyed man with a lopsided smile elbowed his way in to stand beside Dan. "Say, younker," he inquired, "ain't you the young feller Sam Grier raised up from a kid?"

Dan recognized Mike Quayne, noted as a hard-case and as one of the Harridan crowd.

"That's me," Dan muttered. "And Old Sam couldn't have treated me better if I'd been his own son."

Quayne's eyes were suddenly veiled. "Reckon Old Sam trusted you a heap, eh, Mister Travis?"

Once again Dan smiled slyly. He took a leather pouch from his pocket and tossed it onto the bar. "Dust," he said in a drunk's loud, mumbling voice. "Drinks for everybody, on me. We'll drink to the memory of Old Sam Grier—and to his Horse-Shoe Mine. Belly up, folks!"

The crowd pressed forward, suddenly boisterous, and the bartender began setting up the drinks. Only one man did not claim his drink. Quayne had eased himself out of the crowd. Dan Travis saw the hard-case slip out through the swing doors.

Dan kept on with his spree, making a convincing show of it. He kept buying drinks, and nobody seemed to notice that he drank little himself. He danced with the girls, and he sat in at a poker game and lost heavy of his paydirt. He let himself grow drowsy looking, let his mouth droop and his eyes appear heavy lidded.

He thought of Old Sam who had sent him to the mining school up Denver Way. Old Sam had done that before his big strike, when he had been just a mossyhorn desert rat with a poorly paying diggings. Old Sam had done a lot more for Dan, too. He had taken Dan in as orphaned button of four, caring for him when it had been hard for him to obtain a grubstake for himself.

Dan thought of all that as he made his play at carousing. He remembered Old Sam's kindness. He knew the old gent wouldn't want him to give up his schooling to take up the vengeance trail—but Dan kept thinking of how Sam Grier's body had been found out in the desert. Sam had died a hard death, trussed up and tortured, dying rather than tell the location of his fabulously rich mine.

It was midnight when Dan was cleaned out. He had seen his last dust go across the poker table, and now he rose and staggered toward the batwing doors. The crowd watched him go, something of awe in their manner for the amount of paydirt he had squandered. Somebody called, "Come back with another poke-full, amigo!" And a lot of men laughed.

Dan did not answer. He let the doors swing closed behind him, and the clean night air was cool on his face. Santa Clara Street, where the dives stood, was dark and deserted now except for some drunks. Dan hit the boardwalk and, letting himself lurch from side to side, headed toward Main Street. He came to a dark alleyway, and a chill fear swept through him. He had a hunch that the trap would be sprung here.

He was right. Three shadowy figures

moved from the mouth of the alley. Dan recognized one of the men as the lank and furtive Quayne. He mumbled, "What's the idea—?" and grabbed for his gun.

He knew that, being no gun-hand, he hadn't a chance. But he knew too that he wouldn't be killed. He saw Quayne's gun lift and slash down.



DAN came to in a tumble-down shack. An oil lamp on a rough board table cast a yellow glow on the faces of the outlaws facing him. Dan groaned at the throbbing pain in his head. He tried to move, and could not. He was backed against a wall, in an upright position, held there by ropes which tied his wrists to pegs driven into the wall boards.

One of the three, whom Dan recognized as the notorious Red Harridan, came toward him. Harridan's hair was flame red; his eyes were a bright blue and innocent looking as the eyes of a small boy. His face was flabby and criss-crossed by a network of tiny broken veins.

"Kid, we toted you here hangin' over a saddle," he said. "You'll go back the same way, only deader—if you don't tell us where Sam Grier's Horse-Shoe Mine is located."

"Old Sam wouldn't tell you," Dan muttered. "I won't, either!"

"Sam was stubborn as a jughead mule," Harridan told him. "Me, I don't figure you're so tough. We'll find out. Try him, Randt."

Quayne stood over by the door, smoking a quiry, but the third hard-case, Randt, went to the pot-bellied stove which made a heavy heat in the shack and lifted out a branding-iron. The brand marker glowed red and gave out a nasty hissing sound when Randt spat on it.

A panic of terror rode Dan Travis. He was faced by the torment Old Sam Grier had endured. He watched Randt come toward him. The man's face was Indian dark, and his eyes were black and wicked. The outlaw held the red-hot iron up for Dan to stare at. He reached out and ripped open Dan's shirt, baring his chest.

"Hombre, you can save yourself a lot of sufferin'," he muttered.

Dan stared, wide-eyed. The iron was

close to his bare skin now, and he could feel the heat of it. A sweat broke out on his face.

"Don't! Let me loose!" he yelled. "I'll talk. I'll take you to the mine!" He strained at the ropes. "I'll take you—I swear it!"

Harridan jumped forward and shoved Randt aside. "All right, kid." He brought out a knife to cut the ropes.

Dan staggered away from the wall, grabbed hold of the table to keep from falling. Quayne pulled a bottle of whiskey from his pocket and gave him a drink. The raw liquor burned its way down Dan's throat and, after a minute or two, steadied him. Then they clapped his sombrero down on his head, grabbed him by the arms and led him outside to the horses. Red Harridan boosted him into the saddle of paint horse.

"No tricks, kid," Harridan warned.

Dan jerked a nod. He said shakely, "You'll let me go after I show you the mine? You won't kill me?"

"Why, sure not!" Harridan said.

They mounted and headed into the darkness of the desert. The outlaws were in high spirits.

They rode through what was left of the night, trying to make Lost Wells by sun-up. The greed of the outlaws, their lust for Sam Grier's gold, filled them with a senseless haste. They pushed the horses too hard. Dan Travis, riding silently with them, spoke no word of caution. He let them half kill the horseflesh, let them ride into Lost Wells—to find it dried up.

The sun was up then, just lifting over the distant rocks hills, and the scorching heat of the desert enveloped them like a pressure. Lost Wells stood there in the emptiness of the wastelands, a muddy sink-hole surrounded by a few boulders. They rode up and saw the mud. The outlaws cursed.

"No water—not a drop!" Red Harridan growled. "Quayne, step down and stir in the mud. Maybe some water will seep up through."

Quayne obeyed, taking his rifle from its saddle boot and shoving the barrel down into the mud. The mud was caking hard. No water seeped through. Quayne muttered an oath, returned to his horse.

For a long interval, no word was spok-

en. Dan watched the three outlaws, and he could imagine their thoughts. They could turn back to Lanassa for a supply of water, then start out again. But that was risky. It might already be known that the Harridan crew had left town—and that Dan Travis was missing. Somebody, maybe the Law, might be curious by now. "Kid, how far is this Horse-Shoe mine?"

"South," Dan said, waving his hand. "I don't know exactly how far."

"Any water-holes on the way?"

"Yeah. There's one about a day's ride. An old Indian lives there in a lean-to. There was water there when I came by two days ago."

Harridan lifted his reins, put spurs to his lathered horse. "We'll head for there." He gave Dan a scowl. "And, kid, you better be right!"

BY MID-DAY Quayne's horse had developed a limp. An hour later, as they descended a gully left by a long-ago rain, the lamed animal fell and could not rise. Harridan called a halt, and they reined in and watched Quayne take out his gun and put a bullet into the spavined horse. The sound of the gunshot rolled away into the emptiness.

Coming up to the others, Quayne glared at Dan with bloodshot eyes. He still had the gun in his hand. His voice rasped, saying, "Hombre, I've got a hunch you've tricked us. And I got half a notion to put a slug into you!"

Harridan pushed his horse between them. "Don't talk loco, Quayne," he growled. "How could the kid trick us? If he knew Lost Wells was dried up, he wouldn't have brought us here without water. He'd think of himself. Put up that gun, you fool!"

Wildness gleamed in Quayne's eyes for an instant, but then he wiped a fist across his dry lips. He holstered the gun and went to Randt, mounting behind him. They set out again, Randt's dun horse carrying double.

The sun began to arc downward, but at mid-afternoon Dan knew they were still far from the water-hole. His own horse was on its last legs, and he knew that soon he would be afoot. But Randt's dun gave out first, bucking under the weight of a

double load. Dan watched the dark-faced outlaw shoot the horse, then he saw a movement against the brassy sky. A vulture was already wheeling overhead.

Randt turned with the gun still in his hand. He drew a quick bead, his black eyes glittering. His sixgun roared a second time and Red Harridan's horse fell dead from under him. Harridan went sprawling and, before he could recover, Randt stumbled toward Dan Travis—firing again. Dan fell clear as his animal dropped beneath him.

Harridan was up now, yellow dust smeared over his sweat-sodden clothes, his heavy face twisted with rage. He started to draw his gun, but Randt's .45 was leveled at him.

"That's just to even things up," Randt muttered. "I wouldn't want you and the kid to ride out on Quayne and me, Red. Afoot, we'll all reach that mine—or die in this hell-hole!"

For a moment Dan Travis thought there would be gunplay, but Harridan finally choked back his rage. He growled, "All right, Randt—all right." He turned and led the way deeper into the scorched emptiness.

Quayne fell farther and farther behind. After a time Dan looked back and saw the man crawling on his hands and knees. Quayne shouted to them like a beggar, pleading with them not to leave him behind. They could not help him; they had trouble enough carrying themselves on. And when Dan looked back again Quayne was a motionless heap in the distance. Despite his own suffering, Dan smiled a mirthless smile. The first of Old Sam Grier's murderers had paid with his life. . . .

They made it to the water-hole, the three of them staggering up to it at sundown. But a grim Fate laughed at them, for a terrible stench was in the air. Red Harridan and Randt stood by the water and stared at one another, their eyes suddenly burned out in the gauntness of their faces. The rotting carcass of a cow lay in the hole, polluting the water, making it a deadly poison.

Dan Travis fought down an almost overwhelming temptation to throw himself down and gulp down a fill of that polluted water. But he knew he had to

wait a little longer. He told himself he could stand this crazing thirst. He saw Randt fighting against the same temptation. Harridan was turning his back.

"That cow was killed and thrown in there, a-purpose," Randt muttered, his voice a harsh whisper. "That's a sneaky Injun trick."

Harridan turned on Dan, gasping, "Where is that Injun, kid?"

Dan shook his head. "He was here when I came by a couple days ago. He had a horse and a cow and a lean-to. He must've pulled up stakes." Dan was not telling that he had stopped and talked to Old Injun Charley—who had been a friend of Sam Grier.

Randt, watching Dan, suddenly cursed as though he had read his thoughts. "You dirty son—you tricked us!" He grabbed for his gun, moving toward Dan, but he reeled drunkenly and his shot missed.

Behind him, Harridan drew and fired. Harridan's bullet hit Randt in the back. Randt screamed and spun about, then sprawled down into the dust. Harridan stepped over and kicked him, but Randt did not move again.

Harridan lifted his bloodshot gaze and barked a harsh laugh. "That leaves the two of us, kid," he said. "We'll split the gold in Horse-Shoe Mine two ways. I figure we'll get there. You ain't goin' to let yourself die out here. You ain't no fool, kid." He laughed away. "And I ain't no fool, either, kid!"

They could not go on, for both were out on their feet. Harridan said they would hole up for the night. He slumped down with his back to a boulder, gestured with his gun.

"You, kid, hole up on the other side of the water-hole. And don't try no tricks. I sleep light."

Dan made his way around the water-hole and collapsed to the ground. A numbness seeped through him, but he fought back sleep. He had to keep awake until Harridan had dozed off and it was safe to move.

Finally he heard a rasping sound, Harridan snoring, and he rolled over and began crawling toward a stand of red rock. He reached the rocks and rolled a small boulder aside. Buried in the ground beneath it was the canteen of water he had

hidden when passing by on his way into Lanassa.

His hands trembled violently as he took up the canteen and unscrewed its metal cap. He drank greedily and the water was like a life-giving nectar. He paused for breath, then drank again, and it seemed that almost at once the numbness went out of him. His strength came back, and he felt whole again. And he felt like laughing wildly. His trap had worked. Two of Sam Grier's murderers were dead, and the third would shortly die.

Dan replaced the canteen's cap. He would rest an hour, then take the canteen and slip away while Red Harridan slept. He would not sleep, but merely lie there and rest. He closed his eyes, and slept almost at once. . . .

The pink-gray of dawn was leaking over the desert's rim when Dan woke. Fear brought him up to his knees, and he stared back across the stinking water-hole at Red Harridan. The outlaw was still over by the boulder, asleep, his hat fallen off and his red hair showing like a danger signal. His gun was lying beside him.

Dan fought down his fear. He still had a chance. With luck, he could slip away without waking Harridan. He turned and reached for the canteen, but then held his hand. There was a damp spot in the dust. *He hadn't replaced the cap tightly, and the water had leaked out.* Dan knew the canteen was empty, but he picked it up to make sure. He tilted it to his lips. A drop or two moistened his lips. That was all.

Despair gripped him. He had counted on that water pulling him through. He looked out over the desert. It was still a great distance to the Horse-Shoe Mine and safety. He would have to try and make it now—before Harridan woke.

Dan set out, walking at a good pace on the strength of the water he had drunk the night before.



BY MID-AFTERNOON, feeling more dead than alive, Dan stumbled into that hidden rock gorge where Sam Grier had made his strike. Deep within the gorge, after making his way through a fissure in a rock wall, Dan

came into a box-like little canyon where the old desert rat's camp stood.

The piles of rock and soil from the diggings stood near the mine shaft's mouth. A tent filled with food and picks and shovels stood near the water-hole, and resting in the scant shade of the canyon wall was one of Sam's burros. Dan staggered to the water, sprawled on his stomach and drank.

He thought of the three outlaws out on the desert, but he felt no guilt. They had murdered Sam Grier and they would have murdered him.

His thirst slacked, Dan went to the tent and rustled up some grub. And while he ate, he planned what he would do with the future. He would work the diggings, take out just enough gold to see himself through the mining school. On leaving the mine, he would break camp and, with the packed burro, head back across the desert.

His meal stowed away under his belt, Dan got a pick, shovel and the lantern Old Sam had used in the diggings. He stepped from the tent with the lantern, a can of kerosene and the tools—then froze in his tracks.

Red Harridan stood facing him with a gun in his hand.

"Surprised, kid?" The outlaw's laughter grated. "I reckoned I'd give you a scare. Shucks, kid, you ain't so smart. I figured you had things all worked out, guessed it right from the start. You were too anxious to lead me and my pardners here."

Dan's heart hammered against his ribs. His knees felt about to give way. "How'd you get here?" he asked in a ghost of a voice.

"Trailed you. You left easy-to-follow tracks, kid."

"You couldn't have made it without water."

"Sure not. But I had water—last night, out of your canteen. It was enough to bring me here. I wasn't asleep when you dug up that water. I was watchin' you. Had a hunch you had water cached somewhere. Kid, you sure must have thought a lot of that old desert rat we killed."

Dan felt sick at heart. He set down the lantern, tools and the kerosene can.

"All right, Harridan—kill me. You planned on doin' it, so go ahead."

"Why, I wouldn't kill you, kid." A smile wreathed the outlaw's gaunt face. "You did all right by me—leadin' me to the mine. I'm forgettin' the sufferin' you caused out there on the desert. I'm even forgettin' that it was because of you that Quayne and Randt died."

"You leavin' me live?" Dave could not believe it. "You mean that?"

"Sure enough, kid." Harridan chuckled. "I'm lettin' you walk right out of here—right out into the desert. Adios, kid. You're goin' to have a hell of a time of it, unless you got more water cached out there. And I got a hunch that you ain't."

Dan let a look of fear show on his face. He looked at the waterhole, then back at Harridan. "Let me have a drink before I go," he begged.

"Not a chance, kid. All that goes with the Horse-Shoe is mine now. Move on—before I change my mind and gun you down."

Dan turned slowly and walked with dragging step away from the camp. He knew Harridan would not back-shoot him. The outlaw wanted him to die of thirst out on the desert, wanted him to suffer before he died. Dan reached the tunnel-like fissure in the rock wall. He paused and looked back.

Harridan threw a wild shot at him. Dan went on. He had noticed that the outlaw was already holding the lantern. Harridan's greed was filling him with a haste to enter the mine.

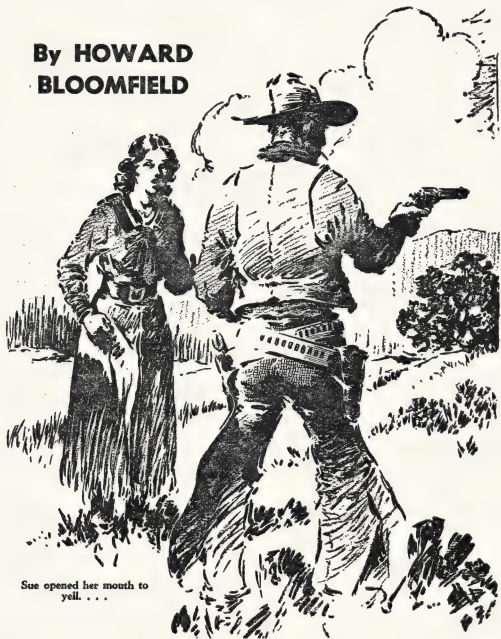
Dan went on through the tunnel, moved slowly through the hidden gorge. But abruptly he halted. An explosion had burst out against the desert stillness. The roar of sound rumbled through the rock gorge. Then the heavy quiet closed down again.

Dan turned back. He knew what had happened. He had prepared this last trick before setting out to avenge Sam Grier's death. And Red Harridan had been too greedy, too much in a hurry at the end. The outlaw had touched a match to that lantern without noticing that it was filled not with oil, but with gunpowder and lead slugs.

GHOST HERD on the JAWBONE

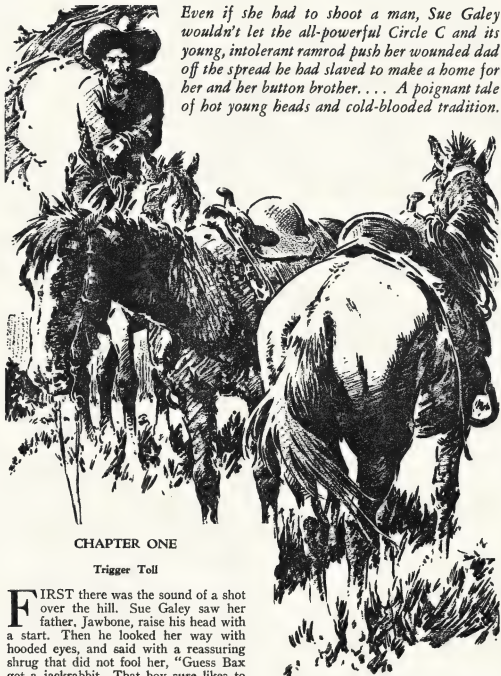
Gripping Novelette of a Nester's Battle to Survive

By **HOWARD
BLOOMFIELD**



Sue opened her mouth to yell. . . .

Even if she had to shoot a man, Sue Galey wouldn't let the all-powerful Circle C and its young, intolerant ramrod push her wounded dad off the spread he had slaved to make a home for her and her button brother. . . . A poignant tale of hot young heads and cold-blooded tradition.



CHAPTER ONE

Trigger Toll

FIRST there was the sound of a shot over the hill. Sue Galey saw her father, Jawbone, raise his head with a start. Then he looked her way with hooded eyes, and said with a reassuring shrug that did not fool her, "Guess Bax got a jackrabbit. That boy sure likes to shoot." Jawbone settled back on his bench in the sun beside the kitchen door.

Sue Galey knew that shot was not the

"I don't hold with that," said Art Grew.

whipcrack of her brother's rifle. That gunshot had been the abrupt slam of a heavy revolver.

Then the riders came down the slope to the new little frame house that Jawbone and Baxter and she had built. Three riders with a young and tall one in the lead. She recognized the tall one long before they pulled up before Jawbone in a swirl of dust, though she had only seen him once.

Once in the town Sue Galey had heard his laugh ring with a healthy joy that lifted her pulse. He was Jerry Converse, son of the owner of Circle C—the big Circle C that aimed to drive the Galeys off the range.

Young Converse's face was blank as he stared at her father. He did not notice Sue at all. His voice was slow and harsh:

"You come with us, Jawbone. We got something to show you."

Jawbone got up slowly. He couldn't quite straighten to his thin height any more. A bullet in his back had done that to him, making him a hobbling old man. He said uncertainly, "This ain't got nothin' to do with my boy Bax?"

"No," said Jerry Converse.

"All right. I'm comin'."

The hard faces of the two men with Jerry Converse frightened Sue.

"I'm coming with you!" she cried.

Young Converse turned toward her for the first time. "No need for you to come, miss. Jawbone, you can walk. It's right near."

He turned his horse away. Jawbone followed, and the two others walked their horses behind him.

Her father looked helpless and old to Sue as he limped on obediently in the midst of the three armed men. Her eyes went moist, and then her slim figure shook with a gust of scorn. Not one of them would have dared face Jawbone Galey, before the injury that had almost killed him. She trotted after her father, calling out, "I'm coming with you!"

They stopped and looked at her, every man of them frowning. The rider on the last horse swept her up and down with smoky, black eyes. "Go on back, sister. This ain't none of your pretty little business."

"Shut up, Turk," said Jerry Converse. "You go back, miss. We won't hurt your

father none. But we got to show him a sight. And I reckon it's not a sight for a lady to look at."

Her quick eyes saw that he was somehow embarrassed. "Don't tell me what I'll do," she blazed. "You're no sight for a lady to look at yourself, Mr. Converse! The three of you with guns around my father who hasn't got one!"

Converse went an angry red, and said to his men, "Come on, before this hot little lady goes up in smoke. She can do what she likes."

"Of course I will," said Sue, and followed them.

The column topped the rise. Jawbone Galey stopped, his head jerking up suddenly as if he had been slapped. Sue saw a great reddish heap on the ground, a carcass as mighty as a crumpled buffalo.

"You're a proddy young squirt," said Jawbone bitterly. "Redhot with a gun, huh? I aim to make you pay for this."

"It's got a JG brand on it," said Jerry Converse calmly. "What brand is that?"

"I reckon you know," said Jawbone Galey. "You'll find out."

"There isn't any JG brand around here," said Converse. "Only brand we know about is Circle C."



JAWBONE went silent, looking bleakly down at the animal. The broad white face of the Hereford bull carried a thickened stream of blood from a bullet hole.

"I had him shipped in here. He cost me five hundred dollars," said Jawbone, his eyes down to slits. "A man that would do this— You killed him personally, younker?"

"No matter," said Jerry.

"I shot him," spoke up Turk, grinning. "Never saw him at all. We practice-shoot on this range most any time we don't see Circle C stuff in the way. You better move out and sell out cheap, Jawbone, while you still got somethin' to sell."

"I'll do the talking here," said Jerry.

"Sure, boss. But your pa says, cut 'er loose. Old Ab don't do no foolin'." Then he nudged the other rider beside him, and pointed to the JG brand. "Jug brand, Art."

Jawbone's head hung tired. The purebred bull had been a heavy investment, planned as the foundation of an outstanding beef herd.

Sue put an arm around her father. Her heart went sick at the way he stood there uncertainly, the quick fire dead in him. She cried to Jerry Converse, "We're not getting out! Go—get away from here! coward!"

Jerry ignored her. "My old man said you can ride over and see him if you want, Jawbone. He don't promise, but he might make you some kind of offer."

"We won't listen to it!" said Sue.

"What kind of offer?" asked Jawbone.

"We don't care, we won't hear it!" she burst out.

"Who's doing the talking here?" asked Jerry Converse.

Sue wished she had her riding crop, to sting him across the face. But she had nothing, and he was sitting high out of reach, tall and calm on his horse.

"My father does the talking," she said proudly.

Jawbone lifted his head with a spark of his old fire. "We don't run and we don't sell." He pointed at the dead bull. "We don't fergit about this. Go tell your old man."

Jerry Converse took off his hat, nodded unsmiling to Sue, and turned away. They rode north toward the Circle C. Only a short way had they gone when a steer plodded along the trail toward them. With a scared toss of horns it trotted aside. The JG brand was on its flank.

Turk turned his saddle, waving at Sue and Jawbone. Something derisive about him made Sue gasp and her father click his teeth. Turk drew his gun. The crash came to them as the cow fell. When its legs struggled and it tried to rise, he shot again.

Jerry and Art had turned and come back to Turk. The horses were in one small

huddle. The men's words began to grumble on the air. All at once, Jerry Converse's hat was flying off, his head ducking low. The whipcrack of a rifle died away.

"Bax!" said Jawbone. "That was Bax!"

Jerry, Art and Turk whirled their horses, galloped after the rifleman. Ahead of them through the shredding line of low brush and big cottonwoods fled a boy on a horse. Jerry Converse shouted, and pulled up short. But Art and Turk, galloping harder, began to throw shots at the boy. Then Jerry Converse spurred on again after his punchers.

Sue Galey screamed.

Jawbone said, "They won't get him. They won't get Bax." His voice was low and passionate, as if his son could hear, and as if he gritted out directions to save him. "He'll go up the left fork. He'll turn over Gopher. He'll lose 'em on Blackrock. They won't find him on Blackrock."

Far ahead, Bax had disappeared. His pursuers were gone too, to burst swiftly out of a thicket and race from sight into another. Three scattered shots floated back.

"Bax'll lose 'em on Blackrock," stated Jawbone.

Then there was a long silence, while Sue shook in nervous sobs. Small in the distance, three riders came into the open and stopped together.

"Like I said," came from Jawbone.

The group separated. Two riders went slowly away on the trail. The other, who wore no hat, came loping back.

Running forward, Sue picked up the hat. It was a good soft gray, dusty from the ground, the band still warm from its wearer's head. On the crown ran a bullet's rough cut. She carried it back to the great reddish-brown body, and looked with a shudder at the wide staring eyes and the stiffened tongue.

"The coward!" she said, laying the hat

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over the bull's face. "If he wants it, he can find it here."

"That makes no sense," said Jawbone. "Come on home."

But when they had topped the rise and started down, she halted. Ahead lay the new little frame house, the sheds and corral that Jawbone and she and Bax had built; and the barbed-wired field of corn. Behind her Jerry Converse was growing large on his horse. She sat down, and her eyes could look just over the rise.

"Come on," said Jawbone.

"Yes," she said. But still she sat, in angry curiosity.

Jerry stopped his horse beside the bull and stared down. But he did not dismount. Hatless, he prodded his horse northward.

CHAPTER TWO

Afoot on the Range

BAXTER GALEY had the long nose and sharp chin of his father, but not the thin mouth. And some day his eyes might be like Jawbone's, half-hooded and penetrating, but now they flashed with a bright triumph.

"If I'd aimed to kill him," Bax declared, "right now he'd be dead. I held right on his head. But I kept my front sight just a hair high. I set out to knock him from under his hat. And that's just what I done."

Sue watched Jawbone fill his pipe slowly from a can on the kitchen table. She thought how her father had changed. Always his words would have been few and stern, yet he would have listened with a betraying glint of humor to the boy's account. But now he was troubled.

"It was good shootin'," insisted Bax. "I'll show you."

He climbed the side-wall ladder to the tiny loft where he slept, and when he backed down the gray hat was on his head. It rested on his ears. When he turned to his father, Sue laughed suddenly. But Jawbone frowned her down.

His eyes shining under the brim of the big hat, yet watching his father anxiously, Bax said, "Look at the hole. Could I come any closer and miss 'im?"

"You could have killed him," snorted Jawbone. "You're too young. Mixin' into

this, and only thirteen years old at that."

"I'm fourteen."

"Proddy little squirt," Jawbone growled. "Now, no more of it. No matter what happens, neither. Don't you ever shoot at a man if he don't shoot at you first."

"I was real careful," said Bax. "Pa, if you'd always waited for a man to shoot at you first—"

"You do what I tell you, and keep your mouth shut!" commanded Jawbone, and walked out the door.

Baxter looked in distress at Sue. "They'll think Pa is afraid. What's the matter with Pa?"

"He isn't afraid. Now don't bother him."

Bax stared. And a confusion flooded Sue and tied her tongue. Even Jawbone's name came from a bullet cut along his face. Indian-fighter and marshal and deputy and inspector, he had earned their living with a swift gun and a hard fearless front; until he had been brought back a dying man from the trail of a horse-stealing band. For months he had hung on grimly, because he refused to die, but when he had got from his bed he was a half-shattered man, wanting the peace of a small ranch with his children.

Bax declared with a challenging face, "The bull was worth twenty-five head of common stock. I ain't got that many shells."

"Bax!" Sue said angrily. "Don't you do anything without letting Pa and me know first!"

"We got to fight them if Pa don't," he said stubbornly.

She nodded. They had to fight—if Jawbone couldn't. She was one of Jawbone's children too.

"Sue," said Bax cheerfully. "this here is a good hat, but it don't fit. I'd like to wear it, just to remember by. But it blows right off."

"I'll fix you a chin-strap for it," she said.

* * *

In the morning the JG herd was in the corn. The stalks were trampled down, and the crop was devastated. There was not even any use in driving the cattle out.

Jawbone rode around the field. He stopped long at each of the dozen places where the barbed wire had been cut. Then he came back to the house.

"I'm going to talk to Ab Converse," said Jawbone.

"Pa," Sue cried, "what are you going to tell him?"

"Hush now!" he said with a quick flare of fire in his eyes. He prodded the horse. "Pa!" yelled Bax. "You want me to get your gun?"

But Jawbone rode away as if he hadn't heard.

The Circle C was two hours' ride away, but in less time than that Jawbone came home, walking his horse to the house and getting down with a stumble.

To Sue he said, "Get Bax to put my hoss away." He limped badly, going to the door, and steadied himself against the jamb.

Sue put an arm swiftly around him. "Pa, what is it? Tell me, Pa."

Jawbone straightened. "I didn't get there. My hoss stepped in a gopher hole. I got throwed, that's all. I got shook up." He limped into his room and closed the door.

Shaken, not believing, Sue heard him settle into his chair. Then Bax beckoned from the kitchen door, with his eyebrows up and frightened.

"Pa's stirrup," he whispered, "got blood on it."

He slid along the wall of the house, flattening against it until he came to a window, and moved an eye cautiously to the glass. Returning on toes, he said, "Bullet hole."

Sue took a quick breath. "Where?"

Bax fingered his calf.

Sue got clean cloths and a basin of water, and knocked on her father's door.

"Pa," she said, "I'm coming in."



BAX was gone at sunset that day, Jawbone half-sat, half-lay in his bed, where Sue had insisted he stay to keep the weight off his leg. She was surprised that he would stay there, but he wanted no company, reclining in bitter thought.

He had made no explanation, except

that he didn't know who had shot at him, and his face forbade any questions. Sue took his supper to him, but when she was washing the dishes she missed Bax.

She went outside. His horse was gone. She climbed the ladder to his loft. On a shelf beside his mattress stood a cartridge box. It was empty. Outdoors again, she broke into a run, alarm driving her light feet. When she panted to the rise a quarter mile behind the house, she saw a puff of dust far away on the northward trail. She ran back to the house.

"Pa," she called, "I think I'll go for a little ride."

For a moment he said nothing; then: "Be back in the house before dark."

The sun was sliding down behind a ridge. But eastward, she knew, the moon waited, full and unseen, to follow the sun across the sky. She snatched saddle and bridle from pegs in the shed and her mare White-face came muzzling to the fence.

Once over the rise, she galloped. Ahead the puff of dust she had seen had now settled. Sue kicked heels into the mare. Four miles away the trail broke downward again, twisting through broken and partly wooded land. Sue stopped to listen above the mare's whistling breath. The day still held a dim light, enough to print the trees black on the gray grasslands. Three more miles she pounded away behind her. When she stopped again—the stillness was broken by a shot.

Immediately another came. As she swung her horse, two more followed close. They were all to the westward. They had all the same crack, and they sounded like Bax's rifle.

She went at a wild pace through a bushy draw, breaking into the open on a rolling plain. Then, uncertain, she stopped and slowly rode on again. The mare shied at a black bulk on the ground. It was a dead cow. Beyond it lay one other dark heap. She took the mare to it. It was another dead cow.

This was Bax's work!

The sharp beat of shod hoofs came to her ears. She snatched up her reins, gasped, "Bax!"

But it was two men, galloping out into the bowl of moonlight. Black silhouettes, bounding across the earth, they came racing from the screen of trees she had left.

They were upon her, guns drawn, before she could move.

"It's the girl!" exclaimed Turk.

"She ain't got a gun." Then Art Grew said with a growling certainty, "It's her damn kid brother out killin' our stock."

Sue blurted, "No! No!"

Grew snorted. "She led us away from the kid."

And Turk said derisively, "She just came out to look at the moon." He put a rough hand under her chin. "Look up, sister, and see the moon."

With a twist Sue slid to the ground, and leaped out to look at the moon. But Turk jumped his horse ahead of her. He swung down from his saddle.

"Come on," said Art Grew. "We got to find Jerry. Maybe he got the kid."

"All-right," said Turk. "But it ain't right if I don't tell her good-by." He pulled her toward him.

"Come on!" said Grew.

"When I kiss this little lady good-by."

In frenzy, like an animal in a trap, Sue burst into fight. She tore an arm free. She kicked madly into his shins, and at his yelp she snatched her other wrist free.

"Sister!" said Turk, coming toward her again. Sue raked both hands into his face. He jumped back.

Leaning from his saddle, Art Grew laughed. "She's told you good-by!"

"Shut up!" yelled Turk. "I'll tell her good-by! She got off to walk. She likes to walk."

With a quick step he pulled his gun, put it to the head of the mare and pulled the trigger. The explosion held them in a stunned silence. The mare sagged and crumpled.

"I don't hold with that," said Art Grew.

"You don't have to," answered Turk, and swung into his saddle. "Come on."

CHAPTER THREE

A Borrowed Ride

A GAINST the warm body of her mare Sue wept, trembling from the brutality. The swift hoofbeats of the departing men faded. She arose presently, stirred by the chill of the mountain air. She gave a long departing look at Whiteface, lying peaceful in the moon-

light. She ran for the sheltering trees a mile away. Among them she began to pick her way home in the half-darkness.

A shout came from a great distance. She could not be sure but it sounded like, "Sue! Sue Galey!"

She listened with her pulse throbbing at her ears. But it could not be Bax, not Bax's high-pitched voice and small chest sending out that vague deep call.

"If it was Jerry Converse," she thought furiously, "then it's a trap."

When she hobbled, two hours later, into the trail just north of her home, a rider came out of the threading line of cottonwoods, and cut swiftly to the trail to block her way. He swung down from his horse, and took off his hat.

"Get up," he said. "Get up and ride."

Sue stared at the hat Jerry Converse held in his hand. A bullet had torn it. It was the same hat that Bax had worn down over his ears. Jerry held a rifle that looked like Bax's.

"Where's Bax?" she cried.

A scowl went over his face in the moonlight. "That boy was killin' cattle."

"Where is he?"

"I wouldn't know right now, ma'am, where that jackrabbit is."

"Is he hurt?" she flung at him. "You've got his hat. Where is he?"

"This used to be my hat," said Jerry gruffly. "He's not hurt. He went ridin' by, standin' in the stirrups."

"Oh!" she cried. "Home?"

"Not now, he isn't," said Jerry. "He and your father went ridin' past here. I guess they're lookin' for you."

"My father can't ride with a bullet in his leg!"

"What?"

"Ah!" she said. "You make me sick."

"All right," said Jerry. "But you must be real tired. Get up on my horse."

Sue said, "No!" and began walking.

"I'd like you to ride my horse home," he said, walking beside her.

"I'll walk," she said. "My horse is dead."

"I know." She saw his face tighten. "Art Grew told me. I'd like to see you get up in my saddle."

"No!" she flared.

He said reluctantly, "Then I'll walk along with you." He led his horse. The

rifle in his elbow, he still carried the hat. With a sidelong glance at his bare head, the last fear went out of Sue. She felt even in his tall form and awkward steps a sudden protection that made her toss her head angrily. "I'll see you get home," he went on. "It isn't safe out here like this."

"Safe!" she said bitterly. "And whose fault is that?"

"You let the men do the fightin'," he warned. They went on in silence, until he asked abruptly: "Who shot your father?"

"I don't know. One of your sneaking men who wouldn't show himself."

"Huh!" he said painfully. "Well, your brother shot six head. I caught him. I surprised him quick in some brush. This is his rifle. Want to hear about that?"

She said swiftly, "What did you do?"

"I tanned him," said Jerry.

Indignation blazed in her. "You coward, you big coward! He's only a boy, he's only fourteen. Why are you fighting boys?"

He breathed deeply. "Not boys, ma'am. Only know one boy," he said apologetically, and looked at his hat. "His shoot-in' is real smart. I wish you'd ride my horse."

"No!" she said. "Go away!"

"All right, we'll walk," he said angrily. "Now understand somethin', miss. I'd see any girl home off the range. This has got nothin' to do with movin' you folks out of here. We're not stoppin' until you've pulled out. I reckon I'll set you up on the horse."

"You won't touch me!" she cried.

He picked her up lightly. She was too weary to struggle, and it was strangely pleasant to be lifted from the ground. He held her against him in one encircling arm while his hand found her foot and put it in a stirrup. She swung obediently into the saddle, and her own obedience angered her.

"I guess you feel better up there," said Jerry calmly.

She reached down and knocked his hand from the rein, and rapped her heels into the horse. When she looked back from a fast lope, he stood still on the trail. It was only two miles to her home. But it was thirteen back to the Circle C.

"They made me walk," she thought, a

catch in her throat. "It serves him right!"

◆ ◆ ◆

AS SHE pounded down the slope to the house, a light burned in the kitchen window. Two saddled horses stood hitched. The door flung open, and Jawbone, supporting himself at a pained angle, shouted, "Sue?"

"Yes, Pa!"

She swung down and ran to help him into a chair. His pant leg and boot were soaked with blood from the reopened wound.

"Where've you been?" he demanded harshly. "We just made a long sweep lookin' for you. I thought you got thrown. Where've you been?"

He settled into the chair with a grunt, fierce with a worry that had turned all of a sudden to anger.

"I found the both of you missing," said Jawbone. "I thought you'd be together. Then Bax come back. Just ridin' around, he said. Ridin' around! Where's his rifle? Lost it, he says. Lost it!"

"I went looking for Bax, Pa."

And Jawbone barked at his son, "So it's back to you! What in hell has been going on?"

Bax sniffled.

"Pa," began Sue. Telling him, she did not mention the dead cattle, because Bax's worried face stopped her. And something held back the meeting with Jerry Converse. She told him she hadn't found Bax, but had been stopped by the two riders.

"They didn't hurt me," she said. "But that dark one, that Turk—he killed Whiteface. He shot her."

Jawbone's face went drawn in the yellow light of the lamp beside him. He muttered, "That settles it! They set you afoot out there?" He went on in a deadly tone. "They made you walk? At night—they did that?"

He pulled open the table drawer, and took out his gun. He broke the barrel and whirled the cylinder. From a box he took six big brass cartridges, and the lamplight gave them a golden gleam.

"They killed your horse and they set you afoot," he said in a passionate voice. "And I went to sell out—I thought I

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couldn't fight any more. This settles it. I'll start with the big young squirt, to pay for the bull."

"Pa!" cried Bax. "I'll help to fight 'em."

"Where's your rifle?" demanded Jawbone.

Outside a footstep sounded. Jawbone blew out the light.

"Hello the house!"

"Who's there?"

"Jerry Converse."

"Who's with you?"

"I'm alone. I come for my horse."

Sue cried, "It's out there. I turned it loose."

"Now what is that about?" growled Jawbone. He drew Bax to him and whispered.

"What I want to say," began Jerry with a seeming effort, "don't change anything about moving you folks out of here. You're leavin'. But about Miss Sue, I'm plumb sorry. About her horse. And gettin' put afoot out there. We don't aim to fight that way, not against women. We—"

Bax walked loudly to the door while Jawbone dragged himself softly to the window. Standing one side, Bax jiggled the latch to catch Jerry's attention. Simultaneously Jawbone punched his revolver through the window panes and aimed it.

"You come in, squirt—" he said—"with your hands up."

Sue heard the rifle thud on the ground. Bax swung the door open.

Jerry Converse came in with his hands spread each side of his hat.

"Stop there," said Jawbone. "Sue, light the lamp."

The match burned Sue's trembling hand. But when the light filled the room, Jawbone's and Jerry's faces matched each other in smoldering calm. Bax took the revolver from Jerry's holster.

"That boy," said Jerry deeply, "is gettin' most everything I own." Something in the words put a quick warm laugh in Sue's throat but she checked it. He took off his hat. "Evenin', miss."

She nodded. And though Jawbone stared at Jerry with stony enmity and Bax had a pugnacious scowl, Sue only watched him, liking his face, and wishing she hated it.

GHOST HERD ON THE JAWBONE

"I don't blame you about the horse," Jerry said to her.

"For a man that would do that," cut in Jawbone, "hangin's too good."

"Pa!" cried Sue. "I told you he didn't do it. He found me and offered his horse for me to ride."

"Him or his men, it makes no difference," said Jawbone, seating himself painfully but with his gun never leaving Jerry Converse. "You done enough already for me to kill you out of hand. I'd have killed you out of the window, but mebbe I got use for you."

"What's that?"

"You're writin' out a paper. Two copies. Put on it a dead bull and a dead cow, barbwire and a field of corn—and my girl's mare. You agree to pay up, and you sign it. When Ab Converse comes here with the money and agrees to keep the peace, I'll turn you loose."

"I'll take a letter to Old Man Converse," spoke up Bax. "I'll put it on the corral gate tonight. They won't catch me no more'n an Injun."

Jawbone nodded.

"Two things wrong with it," stated Jerry Converse. "I won't write out that paper. My old man won't pay a cent. If that's all you got to say, I'll be gettin' my horse and leavin'."

"There's the door," said Jawbone flatly, and from his knee pointed his gun muzzle toward the door.

"Good night, miss," said Jerry lifting his hat. His eyes swung back to Jawbone, who sat deadly calm and cocked the gun with his thumb. Jerry Converse shrugged and moved toward the door.

Sue screamed, "Stop! He'll kill you! He will—he'll kill you!"

Jerry stopped and turned a tight face over his shoulder to look at Jawbone again.

"There's the door," Jawbone repeated quietly. "Take one more step."

After a long moment Jerry Converse walked back to the middle of the kitchen. "You'd do it," he said bitterly.

"Why didn't you keep goin'?" jeered Bax. "You bluffed him, Pa!"

"It wasn't a bluff," said Jawbone, and Sue sat weakly in a chair. Then Bax, with a quick thought, slipped out through

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the door and came back at once with his rifle.

"I found it, Pa."

Jawbone snorted.

"He killed six cows with it," said Jerry.

"Our bull was worth twenty-five," declared Bax. "I got nineteen to go."

Jerry Converse went red with anger. "Now let me tell you somethin', Jawbone! Our men'll be here any time now."

Jawbone put his gun in his lap again. "Quicker than a letter then," he observed. "I want to see them—special them other two. You sure about them comin'?"

"I fired them when I heard about the mare. I told them I'd find the girl and take her home. They talked right back." He moved his feet, embarrassed. "They said they'd see my father about it. They claimed they'd bring the men and burn you out right now. I reckon my old man'll agree to that."

Sue got up to wring her hands. "Dirty cowards!" she choked.

Jerry got a stubborn defiant look. "There shouldn't anyone get hurt," he said, "if your pa don't want it. But you folks have got to go."

"You stubborn fool!" she cried.

"Sue," said Jawbone dryly, "you can make us a pot of coffee. We got company comin'."

CHAPTER FOUR

"You'd Have Shot Me!"

THE hoofbeats of horses were on the air when Jerry Converse took the steaming cup from his mouth. He looked steadily at Sue. "Ma'am," he said, "you make real good coffee."

"Drink up, then," said Jawbone. "And if either of them—" he nodded toward Sue and Bax—"get hurt, you get a slug in the belly."

Bax had made a display of digging bullets out of his pockets and loading the magazine of his rifle. He had Jerry's revolver thrust into his belt.

There was a tiny room off the kitchen, with a cot and chair in it—Jawbone's room. Jawbone made Jerry sit in the chair. He posted Bax on the floor in the doorway, and Sue on the kitchen floor close to him.

GHOST HERD ON THE JAWBONE

"Son, if he moves—" said Jawbone—"kill him."

Bax said in a shaking voice, "Yes, Pa."

Then Jawbone calmly turned down the light. And then turned it still lower, letting his eyes get accustomed—and blew it out.

As the house went into darkness, a shout rang out. Horses swept around behind the barn and stopped.

"Jawbone!" came a yell. "This is Ab Converse! You got Jerry in there?"

"I got him."

"Turn him loose!"

Jawbone's shout was a loud roar inside the house. "When you pay for a bull and a cow! And a crop of corn!"

"You go to hell!"

"And you send the money in with your polecat Turk!"

Bullets banged into the house. Splinters of wood flew.

Jawbone sent three hammering shots. He broke his gun to reload, and the empty cartridges clicked on the floor while the reek of powder drifted through the kitchen.

Silence fell again, and Sue Galey had the swift thumps of her own heart in her ears, and a suffocated feeling in her breast.

Then Jawbone shifted, said bitterly, "They got the barn."

A reddish light began to seep into the house. The air carried a rising hiss and crackle of flames.

Sue choked out words to Jerry Converse, "You ought to be proud of yourself now, Mr. Converse!"

"Well—" he said, and stopped.

Bax exploded, "I hope Pa tells me to shoot you!"

"Quiet in there," said Jawbone.

Ab Converse shouted again. "Jawbone! Turn Jerry loose, or we'll get the house next."

Jawbone answered with four shots, and reloaded. "Bax!" he said, quick and worried. "They're workin' around us. You get to Sue's window. Sue, you keep that fellow pinned right on that chair. If he moves, tell me!"

Bax gave her the revolver that belonged to Jerry Converse, and sidled low into the next room.

"Jawbone! For the last time!" came

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the same peremptory voice. "Turn him loose!"

"He won't come out," promised Jawbone. "If one of us gets hurt, he gets killed! Keep a-comin'."

Bax's rifle cracked. Outside there was a loud curse. The house filled with the banging of shots. A board fell, a ricochet whirled away with a whining shriek. Anvil blows rang off the iron roof. The clock crashed off the kitchen shelf.

"Pa," called Bax, "what leg did you get shot it?"

"Left!" barked Jawbone.

Bax yelled, "That's what I figured!"

Jerry Converse rose out of his chair. Sue leaped up from the floor, pointing the revolver in a tight, shaking hand.

"Your pa would do it," he whispered at her. "Bax would. But you couldn't shoot anybody."

He came toward her on tiptoe. She held the gun in both hands, to stop its waving around. It was all of a sudden a heavy thing that wanted to fall to the floor. Her tongue stuck in her mouth and she couldn't speak. Jawbone's revolver slammed out, and there was a new crack of Bax's rifle. Jerry Converse was very close to her, towering above her. She could not keep the gun steady, but she knew what she was going to do. They were all Galeys fighting together and she had to shoot. She gave a fierce jerk on the trigger.

♦ ♦ ♦

THE trigger clicked, but no shot boomed out. Swiftly she knew the gun had not been cocked. The trigger pull had turned the cylinder and cocked the gun. And now it was ready to fire. But Jerry Converse had hold of her, thrusting the gun aside, his hand covering it swiftly and finding the gap between the hammer and the gun frame. She pulled, and the hammer came down on his flesh.

Then he wrenched the gun from her hand. He clapped a hand over her mouth, and clamped her against him with his arm. She tried to scream. But her voice was muffled in his palm.

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GHOST HERD ON THE JAWBONE

"I want a truce. I'm comin' in to talk."

"You come alone!" warned Jawbone.

Jerry climbed back through the window.

"I need help to get there," Ab Converse called out. "Can't walk. But I'll send the man back."

"Your father honest?" Jawbone demanded of Jerry. "I mean, ordinary honest?"

"He's honest."

"Sue," said Jawbone. "You can light the lamp. If we still got it."

* * *

Ab Converse sat on a chair with his left leg thrust out awkwardly and his right foot tapping angrily on the floor. He was a smaller man than his son, but he helped his height with a high-held head.

Bax, staring at the blood soggy trouser on that left leg, nudged his father.

Ab Converse's shrewd eyes caught the motion. "You did that?" he demanded.

"I could of hit you any place I picked," said Bax. "I just fixed you up like my pa, Mr. Converse."

Jawbone smiled grimly. "Sue, you make coffee," he said. "Make a lot of it."

Jerry stood beside her. Their eyes held, and slow smiles stole over their faces.

Jawbone and Ab Converse, watching them, stared suddenly at each other and dropped their eyes. Jawbone took out his pipe and pushed the tobacco can silently across the table. Ab Converse, too, brought out his battered pipe and stuffed it.

"Damn it!" Ab Converse said, his hard old face working. "Jerry's been tryin' to tell me things are changin' in this country. I guess he's made up his mind to it. Now I reckon—" His face went red with the admission—"there's room enough for both of us. I'll square the damage."

Sue picked up the coffee pot. A sudden flow of happiness went through her. She poured coffee into Jerry's cup. Her arm touched his.

Jerry's hand closed over her arm. They looked deeply into each others eyes.

Minutes later Bax sang out, "Did somebody say something about coffee?"

THE END

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If YOU, like Joe, have a body that others can "push around"—if you're ashamed to strip for sports or a swim—then give me just 15 minutes a day! I'll PROVE you can have a body you'll be proud of, packed with red-blooded vitality! "Dynamic Tension." That's the secret! That's how I changed myself from a spindly-shanked, scrawny weakling to winner of the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

"Dynamic Tension" Does It!

Using "Dynamic Tension" only 15 minutes a day, in the privacy of your own room, you quickly begin to put on muscle, increase your chest measurements, broaden your back, fill out your arms and legs. Before you know it, this easy, NATURAL method will make you a finer

specimen of REAL MANHOOD than you ever dreamed you could be! You'll be a New Man!

FREE BOOK

Thousands of fellows have used my marvelous system. Read what they say—see how they looked before and after—in my book, "Everlasting Herlth and Strength." Send NOW for this book—FREE. It tells all about "Dynamic Tension," shows you actual photos of men I've turned from puny weaklings into Atlas Champions. It tells how I can do the same for YOU. Don't put it off! Address me personally:

Charles Atlas, Dept.
83B, 115 East 23rd
St., New York 10, N.Y.



*Charles
Atlas*

—actual photo of
the man who holds
the title, "The
World's Most Per-
fectly Developed
Man."

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83B,
115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N.Y.

I want the proof that your system, so "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book "Everlasting Herlth and Strength."

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City.....State.....

☐ Check here if under 16 for Booklet A

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The whiskey with the "Happy Blending"

Calvert Distillers Corp., New York City. BLENDED WHISKEY Calvert "Reserve" 86.8 Proof—65% Grain Neutral Spirits. Calvert "Special": 86.8 Proof—60% Grain Neutral Spirits.